

Creating Canada's Peacekeeping Past by Colin McCullough

Adam Chapnick

Volume 109, Number 2, Fall 2017

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1041292ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1041292ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Chapnick, A. (2017). Review of [*Creating Canada's Peacekeeping Past* by Colin McCullough]. *Ontario History*, 109(2), 274–275.

<https://doi.org/10.7202/1041292ar>

Creating Canada's Peacekeeping Past

by Colin McCullough

Vancouver and Toronto: UBC Press, 2016. 255 pages. \$95.00 hardcover. ISBN 9780774832489 \$32.95 paperback. ISBN 9780774832496 <ubcpres.ca>

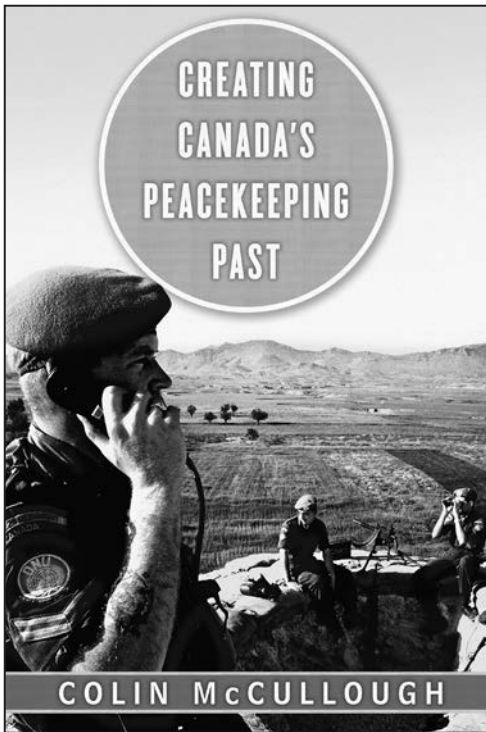
The publication of *Creating Canada's Peacekeeping Past* marks the largely successful debut of a promising scholar of Canada's new political history. Colin McCullough seeks to explain how and why Canadians have come to think of their country as, in his words, "a peacekeeping nation" (3). These are important, timely questions, and the author investigates them with great authority.

McCullough's bases his analysis on a remarkably thorough 'data set'. His six chapters draw not only from traditional sources like political speeches and newspaper accounts, but also from high school textbooks, National Film Board productions, public monuments, and, perhaps most important given the more critical nature of the source, editorial cartoons. In each case, the author's professional training as an historian is easily apparent, and he handles both the English and French language evidence with impressive attention to detail. *Creating Canada's Peacekeeping Past* is also well-integrated into the Canadian and international historiography of commemoration, public memory, and national identity.

The book's general argument is convincing. There have been, McCullough maintains, "three parallel discourses about peacekeeping that referred to the past, the present, or the future for audiences" (9). The first has aimed to evoke feelings of nostalgia. Some analysts have looked back on Canada's peacekeeping history through an idealized lens that minimizes the nega-

tive impacts of particular Canadian experiences and links the idea of promoting peace to the core of Canada's national identity. Discourses focused on the present have been significantly more critical. They have used what McCullough calls a functionalist lexicon to highlight the flaws in the execution of peacekeeping missions that the nostalgic view has conveniently ignored. Finally, progressive analysts have called for a renewed Canadian commitment to United Nations peacekeeping in order to make a valuable contribution to "a more peaceful planet" (9).

The book makes three significant contributions to the historiography. First, it effectively undermines the nostalgic view by presenting a significantly more nuanced history of Canada's peacekeeping experience between 1956 and 1997. McCullough reminds readers that not all Canadians initially embraced Lester Pearson's efforts to resolve the Suez crisis in 1956. Nor were Canadians overly enamoured with the United Nations as a whole when Secretary-General U Thant failed to prevent Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser from expelling the United Nations Emergency Force in 1967. Unfortunate events in Somalia in the 1990s were also hardly pride-inducing. The author concedes that he is not the first to challenge the nostalgic framework—historians Michael Carroll and Kevin Spooner have been similarly critical—but *Creating Canada's Peacekeeping Past* moves beyond case studies of individual missions and is therefore able to offer a more



comprehensive assessment. Second, McCullough explains persuasively how and why English and French Canadians have rarely thought of peacekeeping the same way. (The attachment among English Canadians has typically been more visceral). Finally, this book adds even greater credibility to the diversity of tools available to contemporary political historians in their efforts to understand Canada's past. Certainly, none of McCullough's sources are new in and of themselves, but the combination that he has chosen, the thoroughness of his research, and his deft handling of the material he has assembled sets a high bar for future historians seeking to study the intersection of Canadian national identity and international policy.

McCullough demonstrates an overwhelming grasp of the identity literature, but at times he neglects to take into account some of the more noteworthy con-

tributions to the Canadian peacekeeping canon. Walter Dorn, for example, has been a tireless progressive scholar/practitioner of UN peacekeeping for more than three decades, and one who would enthusiastically endorse the book's conclusions. Norman Hillmer's more functional work on peacekeeping and national identity is perhaps the clearest antecedent to McCullough's own scholarship. References to the historian Sean Maloney's broad corpus of serious scholarly work might have been more helpful to readers than two polemics by the retired commentator J.L. Granatstein.

Similarly, while it is difficult to find fault in the diversity of evidence that McCullough has assembled, one wonders whether the annual Remembrance Day visits and speeches by Canadian veterans to primary and secondary schools across the country might have been worth studying. Such personal engagements tend to have greater impact on students than selections from textbooks. Perhaps there might also have been something to learn from an investigation of the role and impact of prominent non-governmental advocacy organizations like the World Federalists, Pugwash, and the United Nations Association in Canada. All three have aggressively pursued progressive agendas that promote both support for the United Nations and for peacekeeping operations more generally. It is likely that they too have had a measure of impact on popular Canadian thinking.

Creating Canada's Peacekeeping Past is a valuable book by a serious scholar. It will be required reading for scholars of Canadian and foreign and defence policy and international affairs for years to come.

Adam Chapnick
Royal Military College of Canada