

## “Literary Memorials”: The Great War Regimental Histories, 1919-1939

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### Article abstract

While the Canadian Corps earned a reputation as one of the finest fighting formations on the Western Front during the First World War, and had an efficient publicity machine under the guiding hand of Lord Beaverbrook to propagate their deeds, the Canadian government was slow to codify this reputation in postwar historical texts. The Official History was delayed for nearly two decades and veterans were bitterly disappointed in being denied a comprehensive account of their battles. As a result, regiments took it upon themselves to craft their own histories. Although now largely ignored by historians, this genre of historical writing documented the actions of the unit during the war and served as a tool to commemorate fallen comrades. The regimental histories are important texts within the canon of Canadian military historiography, offering matchless insight into the events and social history of the Great War, as well as into the post-war efforts of combatants and their families to find meaning for this cataclysmic event.

## “Literary Memorials”: The Great War Regimental Histories, 1919-1939<sup>1</sup>

TIM COOK

“Soldiers make wars, but historians make the history of them,” observed one Great War veteran.<sup>2</sup> Yet, for the most part, historians did not rush into print after the Armistice in 1918. Despite a ready-made audience of veterans and their families for a comprehensive history of Canada’s role in the war, there had been only a few wartime accounts, and just one, Lord Beaverbrook’s series, *Canada in Flanders*, had been based on the official war records. While soldiers had learned to ignore the wartime writing emanating from the home front as jingoistic pieces warped by hyper-patriotism and war fervour, many veterans were anxious, once they had demobilised and settled back in Canada, to understand the event that had so greatly affected their lives.<sup>3</sup> There were a number of popular Canadian histories written by journalists, as well as American histories with Canadian chapters inserted, but an official account based on authentic war records remained unavailable. The government announced in 1917 and then again in 1921, that an official history of the war would be provided for veterans, their families and all Canadians, but there appeared to be little progress over the next decade. The Canadian official history was delayed time and time again, with Lieutenant-Colonel A.F. Duguid, the official historian of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF), and his staff at the Army Historical Section (AHS), able to publish only the first of a projected eight-volume series,

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1 The author would like to thank Terry Cook, Cameron Pulsifer, Laura Brandon, and D. Peter MacLeod for their insightful comments and careful reading of the article.

2 Sir Andrew Macphail, social critic and official historian of the Canadian Army Medical Corps, made this observation to Sir Arthur Currie, the former Canadian Corps Commander, only months before the General’s death in 1933. National Archives of Canada (NAC), MG 30 E100, Currie Papers (hereafter CP), volume 11, file 33, Macphail to Currie, 24 March 1933.

3 “We don’t know nothing except what we see in the newspapers, and we know that’s not true,” wrote painter A.Y. Jackson to J.E.H. MacDonald while serving on the Western Front. Maria Tippett, *Art at the Service of War: Canada, Art and the Great War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 68. Also, see Jeffrey A. Keshen, *Propaganda and Censorship During Canada’s Great War* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1996), 140-1; and J.G. Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies, 1914-1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

and that not until by 1938.<sup>4</sup> To many, the long delay was inexcusable. When the Second World War broke out a year later, the Great War history project was shelved for the duration, and eventually cancelled in 1948. Canada's veterans were denied an official account of their war, where almost 60,000 had died and another 172,000 had been rendered casualties. Furthermore, the war records that could have elucidated the wartime experiences of 2nd Ypres, Vimy Ridge, and the Last 100 Days had been left to languish in the tightly guarded AHS, unavailable for general consultation. Only a select band of approved researchers had access to these records, and they consisted almost exclusively of regimental historians.

Long forgotten except by the most avid of bibliophiles, regimental histories are viewed by professional historians as quixotic monographs, more akin to publicity pieces or organisational hagiography than to legitimate historical works. Nonetheless, while the regimental histories were by no means the last word in exploring or explaining the experience of war, they filled an important historiographical gap left by the ever-delayed official history. From 1919 to 1938, more than sixty regimental histories were published, of which more than two dozen were full-length monographs.<sup>5</sup> The AHS provided advice, expert knowledge and editing services for the informal regimental history program because these works were seen as integral publications that would not only supplement the official history, but also give a voice to the soldiers who would be largely excluded from the more sweeping narrative of the official history.

At the same time, the AHS's involvement in the regimental history program ensured that Duguid could exert control in shaping the interpretation of the war. Duguid wielded enormous influence because of his expertise as the official historian and because he controlled access to the war records. As the regimental historians were the only writers given access to the war records, it was they whom Duguid both assisted and pressured to conform to his view of how the Canadian Corps would be captured in print for future generations.

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4 For this delay, see Wes Gustavson, "'Fairly Well Known and Need Not be Discussed': Colonel A.F. Duguid and the Canadian Official History of the First World War," *Canadian Military History* 10/2 (Spring 2001): 41-54. Duguid was either unaware as to how long a history would take or wilfully misleading senior officers. Early in his career as the official historian, Duguid estimated that the expected seven-volume history (later expanded to eight) would "be produced at the rate of one volume annually." Several times he promised that the histories would be forthcoming in the near future, and then failed to deliver. See Duguid's draft letter to Major-General C.G.S. (H.C. Thacker), 16 March 1928. NAC, Records of the Department of National Defence (hereafter RG 24), v. 1738, DHS 3-17 (vol. 3); and v. 1733, DHS-1-12 (pt 2), Report of the Director, Oct-Dec 1923.

5 In addition, there are more than thirty souvenir books and another twenty or more post-1945 regimental histories. These figures have been compiled from O.A. Cooke, *The Canadian Military Experience 1867-1995: A Bibliography*, Third Edition (Ottawa: Directorate of History and Heritage, 1995).

Certainly, Duguid’s and other influences helped to produce regimental histories that are flawed and must therefore be used with caution. But they were not completely sanitised. There is no better way to understand a battalion’s wartime actions or its trials of battle than to turn to the regimental histories. In addition, these works were crafted as items of commemoration and comfort to the bereaved. Although the regimental histories have their limitations, if they are understood as products of their time, this genre of historical texts can provide insight into one of the ways that Great War veterans attempted to find meaning in their war experience.

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In 1914, Canada marched to war as a dominion, eager to support Great Britain in her struggle against German militarism. Although Canada entered the war with almost no professional soldiers, by 1918, the Canadian Corps was one of the most feared and respected forces on the Western Front. While the reputation of the Canadian Corps was built on a string of operational victories in the hard-pounding campaigns of the Western Front, it also had a very efficient publicist who propagated their deeds during the war.

Canadian millionaire Max Aitken, later Lord Beaverbrook, took it upon himself to popularise the Canadian war effort for those on the home front, in both Canada and the Empire. Through his close friendship with Minister of Militia and Defence Sam Hughes and Prime Minister Robert Borden, Aitken was established as Canada’s “Eye Witness” at the front. In this unique capacity, he travelled with units, interviewed soldiers, and documented the war. With no Canadian journalists initially allowed at the front, Aitken sent reports back to Canada that were widely published and extremely popular among the patriotic and news-starved home front population.<sup>6</sup> After witnessing the 1st Canadian Division’s desperate stand at 2nd Ypres, where the Germans unleashed lethal chlorine gas for the first time and the Canadians fought a skilled but costly rear-guard action, Aitken set about crafting a history that would “immortalise” his fellow countrymen.<sup>7</sup> In *Canada in Flanders*, he recounted the bravery of the Canadian troops based on his own observations, first-hand accounts, and access

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6 The Canadian government made little effort to have journalists at the front. See Keshen, *Propaganda and Censorship During Canada’s Great War*, especially 28-39; Tippet, *Art at the Service of War: Canada, Art and the Great War*, 17-20; and Martin Farrar, *News From the Front: War Correspondents on the Western Front 1914-18* (Thrupp, Stroud, Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 1998).

7 The 1st Canadian Division suffered a little more than 6,000 casualties in the battle. See Tim Cook, *No Place To Run: The Canadian Corps and Gas Warfare in the First World War* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1999) and Daniel Dancocks, *Welcome To Flanders Fields* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1988). For Beaverbrook’s immortalization comment, see CWRO, Report Submitted to...Sir Robert Borden, 11 January 1917. NAC, Records of the Department of Militia and Defence (hereafter RG 9), v. 4746, Folder 175, file 1.

to the official records that were in his care, ensuring that Canadian deeds would be appreciated throughout the Empire. The book met with instant success and went through twelve printings by March 1916.<sup>8</sup>

Riding on the success of this publication, Aitken established the Canadian War Records Office in January 1916. It was a combined archives and propaganda agency that commissioned official photographers and cinematographers, gathered historical material, archived and catalogued war records, and disseminated pro-Canadian news stories. All was done in the hope of elevating, publicising, and popularising the deeds of the Canadian soldier.<sup>9</sup> Unsatisfied with simply collecting materials, Aitken also directed his writers to craft additional books and monographs.<sup>10</sup> Moving from this important first step in building an historical foundation about Canadian exploits during the Great War, Beaverbrook felt an official history was needed. But he was not the man for it, explaining to another chronicler of the CEF that an official history “can only be undertaken after the War. As yet many matters of importance to the narrative cannot be disclosed.”<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, planning and preparation for that history was begun before the war was over. In 1917, the task of writing the history fell to Brigadier-General Ernest A. Cruikshank, a militia officer and expert on the War of 1812.<sup>12</sup>

Cruikshank had not served overseas during the war and, after a long and distinguished career in the service of his country with the NWMP and militia, his reputation had been seriously marred in 1916 when a number of his soldiers rioted in Calgary.<sup>13</sup> Senior officers at the Department of Militia and Defence felt that Cruikshank, who was close to retirement, had lost his grip on the task of training soldiers, and he was subsequently transferred to finish off his days as a historian in Ottawa. Established as the Canadian Expeditionary Force’s

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8 One CWRO report claimed 250,000 copies were sold by May 1916. Report by Sir Max Aitken to Rt. Hon. Sir Robert Borden on the Joint Establishment of the Canadian Representative at the Front and the Canadian War Records, n.d. [ca. 19 May 1916]. NAC, Lord Beaverbrook papers, reel A-1765.

9 For the activities of Beaverbrook and the CWRO see Robert McIntosh, “The Great War, Archives, and Modern Memory,” *Archivaria* 46 (Fall 1998): 1-31; and the forthcoming article by Tim Cook, “Documenting War and Forging Reputations: Sir Max Aitken and the Canadian War Records Office in the First World War,” *War In History*.

10 Volumes II and III of the *Canada In Flanders* series were published in 1917 and 1918 (the second by Aitken, the third by Major Charles G.D. Roberts), and several CWRO staff members churned out short histories, like Beckles Willson, *In The Ypres Salient* (London: 1916). As well, four short regimental histories were published.

11 NAC, Beaverbrook Papers, MG 27 II G 1, Series E, reel A-1765, Aitken to Willson, 22 May 1916.

12 For Cruikshank’s duties, see Order in Council 19 of 17 January 1917.

13 See NAC, MG 27, II-D-9, A.E. Kemp Papers, v. 70, file 19, Memo to Kemp, 2 December 1916; and P. Whitney Lackenbauer, “The Military and ‘Mob Rule’: The CEF Riots in Calgary, February 1916,” *Canadian Military History* 10/1 (Winter 2001): 31-43. Cruikshank commanded Military District 13 in Calgary.

(CEF) official historian in early 1917, Cruikshank began to compile records relating to the war. He succeeded in publishing three volumes of pre-war military documents; the fourth, completed in 1920, began with the First World War and finished with the battle of 2nd Ypres.

Unfortunately, what Cruikshank gained in expediency, he lost in quality. His First World War monograph was almost unanimously panned by senior officers who, now freed from fighting, began to take an interest in how the war would be presented by historians. “One feels that it was necessarily written by a man whose absence from the operation deprived him of the power of living the events,” wrote General Currie to one former subordinate officer after reading it. “It lacks fire and imagination and impressiveness.”<sup>14</sup> This was not a case of senior generals disagreeing with Cruikshank’s interpretation; rather, the text was simply seen as unimaginative and weak, especially in comparison with other the wartime writing like Beaverbrook’s semi-official histories, or Sir Arthur Currie’s 1918 report to the Ministry of Overseas Forces that had been prepared by his small historical team in the Canadian War Narrative Section (CWNS). Although there would be a battle of reputations in the 1920s, the senior generals expected their historians to at least write something of substance. So Cruikshank was retired and A.F. Duguid, a decorated officer with a pre-war engineering degree, was appointed in his place.<sup>15</sup>

Duguid had distinguished himself during the war as first an artillery officer, then a staff officer, and finally as a senior researcher and writer in the CWNS. Although not a trained historian, Duguid’s successful experience with the CWNS and his reputation as a combat veteran, appealed to the generals. In 1921, the order-in-council establishing his post as head of the newly created Army Historical Section decreed that he would be responsible for writing a “complete official history.”<sup>16</sup> Instead of focusing exclusively on the official history, however, Duguid was also required to organise the war records, assist regimental historians, answer inquiries, prepare lectures, and sit on various time-consuming military committees. With only a small supporting staff, it often fell to Duguid to prepare answers to all historically related questions emanating from within the Department of National Defence.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, from 1924 to 1928, the official historian’s time was drawn away from the official

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14 CP, v. 11, file 34, Currie to MacBrien, 12 January 1921. For a short introduction to Cruikshank see A.M.J. Hyatt, “Official History in Canada,” *Military Affairs* XXX/2 (Summer 1966): 93-94. The fourth volume, *Canadian War Records: A Narrative of the Formation and Operations of the First Canadian Division, to the End of the Second Battle of Ypres, May 4, 1915*, was printed, but never distributed.

15 J.M. Hitsman, *Historical Activities Within the Canadian Army* (Ottawa: Department of National Defence, 2 July 1965): 3-5.

16 See Order in Council 1652, 27 May 1921.

17 The Department of Militia and Defence had been re-designated as the Department of National Defence in 1922.

history in a lengthy battle with the British official historian, Sir James Edmonds, over the role of the Canadians at the 2nd Battle of Ypres (1915).<sup>18</sup> In short, while Duguid realised the necessity of publishing an official history, he first felt it was first his duty to protect the reputation and memory of the Canadian soldier from all who would attempt to challenge it.

A number of post-war accounts were published by journalists or veterans,<sup>19</sup> but no historian, except future University of Toronto professor Frank Underhill, author of a short but perceptive operational history of the CEF, had been given access to the archival records.<sup>20</sup> Notwithstanding Underhill's work, these instant histories necessarily lacked accuracy, being based on censored or constrained journalistic pieces or scattered first-hand observations. In addition, although a few memoirs had been published, there was nothing from the senior Canadian generals to explain their unique view of the war.<sup>21</sup> Nor would there be, as several of the generals died early in the 1920s. The two corps commanders most closely identified with Canada's war published very little. Currie was unable to find time to pen his memoirs, and Sir Julian Byng was unwilling to "abuse" anyone, as was often the case, he believed, when soldiers' recounted their lives for posterity.<sup>22</sup>

18 See Tim Travers, "Allies in Conflict: The British and Canadian Official Historians and the Real Story of Second Ypres (1915)," *Journal of Contemporary History* 24 (1989): 301-325; and "Currie and 1st Canadian Division at Second Ypres, April 1915: Controversy, Criticism and Official History," *Canadian Military History* 5/2 (Autumn 1996): 7-15.

19 For example, see G.G. Nasmith, *Canada's Sons and Great Britain in the World War* (Toronto: Winston Company, 1919); F.A. MacKenzie, *Through the Hindenburg Line* (Toronto: Hodder and Stoughton, 1918); Fred James, *Canada's Triumph: From Amiens to Mons* (London: Charles and Sons, 1919); Harwood Steele, *The Canadians in France, 1915-1918* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1920); Makers of Canada War Series, *Canada in the Great World War*, 6 volumes (Toronto: Makers of Canada, 1917-23).

20 Frank H. Underhill, "The Canadian Forces in the War," in *The Empire at War*, ed. Sir Charles Lucas (London: Published by the Royal Colonial Institute by the Oxford Press, 1923), Volume II. Underhill had access both to the war records and also senior generals like Sir Arthur Currie. CP, 27/7, Currie to Underhill, 8 September 1920 and 17 September 1920. On historians not being given access to the war records, see Duguid to Major J.M. Macdonnel, 4 September 1931, NAC, RG 24, v. 1740, DHS 4-4 pts 4.

21 For example, see H. Baldwin, *Holding the Line* (Chicago: McClurg, 1918); Louis Keene, *Crumps: The plain story of a Canadian who went* (New York: Mifflin, 1917); A. McClintock, *Best o' luck* (Toronto: McClelland, 1917); A.J. Lapointe, *Souvenirs et impressions de ma vie de soldat* (Montreal: Le Devoir Press, 1919); F.G. Scott, *The Great War as I saw It* (Toronto: Goodchild, 1922).

22 On Byng's point of view, see editorial, *Canadian Defence Quarterly* (July 1935): 384. As the editorial remarked, "The viewpoint has its merits, but it is something of a pity that he preserved that silence, for undoubtedly he hold within himself the solution to more than one controversial issue." The Currie papers contain a half a dozen references to his desire to write his memoirs, but also his inability to find the time. Sir Richard Turner would have been a good candidate to write his memoirs as he outlived all his contemporaries, and was angry with some of Duguid's interpretations in Volume I of the official history, but never published anything.

Wary of journalistic accounts, veterans and their organisations began to pressure the government to ensure the completion of the official history. A.E. Graham, a maimed veteran of the 8th Battalion then living in the United States, wrote to Duguid in 1924 requesting an authentic history in order “to combat the arguments of certain bigoted Americans who claim the United States had the best troops in the War; and, second, to revive old memories of the different sectors, villages, rest billets, raids, etc...I am trying to get enough information together to enable me to live over again the happy days which are now only memories.”<sup>23</sup> Not all requests were made for buttressing reputations or reliving pleasant memories, however, and countless parents, wives, and children must have yearned for some insight into where their loved ones had gone and why they had never returned. As one still-grieving father wrote to the Department of National Defence in 1930, he had waited thirteen years for a history so he could understand in greater detail where and how his son, Lance-Corporal Herbert Brock, had been killed.<sup>24</sup> Even in 1932, the editors of *Maclean's* magazine informed Duguid that they received “almost daily... enquiries from ex-Service men” looking for wartime histories.<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, Duguid, faced with the enormous task, continued to research, and delayed committing his knowledge to paper.<sup>26</sup>

Duguid remained convinced that he could not begin writing until he had read, arranged, and placed every document in a master narrative outline. As he put it, the “object is to find out exactly what happened; conclusions cannot be drawn until all information has been arranged in such form that it can be grasped readily and the relative importance of events weighed. Otherwise conclusions will be faulty and probably entirely wrong.”<sup>27</sup> Caution was necessary while working on an official history, but examining hundreds of tons of documents was a mind-boggling task. Nonetheless, Duguid felt he had a duty to his fellow soldiers, both the dead and the survivors. The official history had to be accurate, as mistakes would only denigrate the memory of the fallen. Faced with a myriad of tasks and lacking any formally-trained historians to

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23 NAC, RG 24, v. 1740, DHS 4-4 pt 4, A.E. Graham to The Director of Records, 30 January 1924.

24 NAC, RG 24, v. 1502, file HQ 683-1-29 pt. 3, A.W. Brock to Officer in Charge of Records, 21 January 1930.

25 NAC, RG 24, v. 1502, file HQ 683-1-29 pt. 5, *Maclean's* to Duguid, 13 December 1932.

26 His fellow official historian, Sir Andrew Macphail, had not been as worried about meticulous detail. In 1924, Macphail's medical official history was published and was criticised for its polemic account of the war and its strident denunciations of Sir Sam Hughes. This harsh response, too, must have further crystallised the need in Duguid's mind to find and document every action with complete accuracy. For reviews of Macphail's work, see NAC, RG 24, v. 1872, file 13, History of the Canadian Forces, 1914-19. Medical Services, n.d. (ca. February 1926).

27 NAC, RG 24, v. 6990, file: Introduction to Preface, undated document, ca. 1938.



assist him, Duguid and his chronically under-funded Historical Section were simply not up to the challenge of producing a series of official histories. In the meantime, until Duguid felt ready to produce his *magnus opus*, the task of explaining the war's events fell to the regimental historians.

To meet the needs of veterans who demanded a history and of officers who felt that a wartime account would buoy *esprit de corps* and inspire future recruits in the successor militia units that proudly carried the CEF battle honours, a number of battalions immediately struck boards to commission someone to pen a manuscript. First, money had to be raised. Some regiments were able to dip into their canteen funds but most relied on patrons or fund-raising operations. Several thousand dollars were needed to do a press-run of a thousand to fifteen hundred books.<sup>28</sup> As more than five thousand men passed through each of the battalions (and many more families were connected to the unit through the service of loved ones), it may seem odd that the press-runs were not higher. These figures might better be explained when one understands that the men of the CEF had an average education-level of grade six.<sup>29</sup>

In 1920 and 1921, several battalions, field ambulance units, and artillery batteries published regimental histories. These hurried texts were often short and based heavily on privately held records or first-hand accounts. Sometimes the histories were written by one chronicler who used his own personal diary from which to craft a narrative. There was little access for these early writers to the official war records, such as after-battle reports, brigade or divisional war diaries, orders, medical records, or maps, as this material was still in France or packed up at the AHS in Ottawa. However, some, like Lieutenant-Colonel Joseph Hayes in his regimental history prepared for the 85th Battalion, did use the war records created by the regiment, and were stronger as a result.<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, without consulting the AHS, these first historians had little understanding of how the battalion fit into the larger strategic picture of the war and were prone to errors of fact and problematic interpretations. In the end, most served as souvenir pieces rather than as historical work.

The exception to these hastily published histories was Ralph Hodder-Williams's *Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry*. This history is worth examining in some detail as it set the standard for the future relationship between the regimental historians and Duguid. In 1914, millionaire Hamilton

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28 For press-runs, see Duguid to Major Gordon Thornton, 2 February 1933, NAC, RG 24, v. 1754, DHS 9-1.

29 For education levels in the CEF, see Desmond Morton, *When Your Number's Up: The Canadian Soldier in the First World War* (Toronto: Random House, 1993), 278; and Tim Cook, "From Destruction to Construction: The Khaki University of Canada, 1917-1919," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 37/1 (Spring 2002): 109-143.

30 Lt. Col. Joseph Hayes, *The Eighty-Fifth In France and Flanders* (Halifax: Royal Print, 1920), introduction.

Gault independently raised the PPCLI, and it was the first Canadian infantry battalion to serve overseas. Serving first with the 27th British Division and then with the 3rd Canadian Division, the PPCLI earned an admirable reputation during the war. Following demobilisation, Gault, who had lost his leg in battle, commissioned a history. He hired Ralph Hodder-Williams, both a decorated junior subaltern from the regiment and a professor of history at the University of Toronto.

Beginning in 1920, Hodder-Williams made contact with Cruikshank and Duguid at the AHS, who were quick to offer their support. Although Hodder-Williams had access to the primary records, the research was difficult, as there were few reliable secondary sources on which to draw to construct the larger context surrounding his individual unit's actions. Hodder-Williams took short research trips to Ottawa, but he also relied heavily on the staff at the AHS to supply him with war documents.<sup>31</sup> Weighing the available evidence was an arduous task, as the introduction to the final history revealed:

Sometimes these reports, written in the heat of an action and emanating from the various sections of the battlefield involved, are inevitably contradictory, and so upon the historian is imposed the added responsibility of disentangling the truth from a maze of conflicting data and the personal recollections of those who were engaged. Where reminiscence and documentary evidence clash, it is necessary to jettison the former, since, while frequently invaluable, it is, as all soldiers know, apt at times to throw the picture as a whole out of focus.<sup>32</sup>

While the introduction was clearly penned to protect the historian from those naysayers who would disagree with a narrative that might not conform to their memories, it also provides some insight into the importance of the war records in imparting a sense of objectivity. Without the war records, the clamour of voices demanding changes to a history would be deafening. Duguid, in charge of these records, was thrust into an important role in the production of the regimental histories.

Although Hodder-Williams relied heavily on the AHS, he also worked closely with those he deemed the chief stakeholders in the history – the officers of the regiment. The final historical text went through a careful vetting by officers, who supplied additional information on the regiment's actions and also filled in gaps where the war records were incomplete. Not surprisingly, then, there was little space devoted to enlisted men throughout the text, as they were often left out of the formal records created during the conflict, like the war diary

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31 NAC, RG 24, v. 1754, DHS 10-8, Hodder-Williams to Duguid, 15 June 1921.

32 Ralph Hodder-Williams, *Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry*, (Toronto: Hodder and Stoughton, 1923), Vol. I, ix.

and reports of operations. Nor were they, like the officers, called on by the historian to supplement the draft narrative.<sup>33</sup>

The officers' additional insight and evidence were indeed important, but the records suggest that the information supplied by Duguid and his staff at the AHS was essential in bringing the history to fruition. Although it was a time-consuming task, Duguid took his role seriously. In addition to making twenty-five pages of single-spaced notes relating to the draft chapters, Duguid looked for inconsistencies and any evidence that might disparage the reputation of the Canadian Corps. As Duguid explained to Hodder-Williams after one exchange over conflicting views: "You must forgive my going hard after this, but 'Get[ting] it right' becomes almost an obsession."<sup>34</sup> For the most part, though, they rarely disagreed and Hodder-Williams relied on Duguid for his expertise and access to the war records. One of the few times they did differ occurred when Hodder-Williams wrote that the staff planners at the Battle of Courcellette on 15 September 1916 failed to provide enough stretcher-bearers to accommodate the massive influx of casualties. Duguid took offence to the remark, even though it was true and the men of the PPCLI had suffered for it. Hodder-Williams backed down apologetically. "As I think you know, the idea of criticism of higher authorities was absolutely foreign to my whole conception of the book," wrote the chastened Hodder-Williams.<sup>35</sup> As only a subaltern during the war, and even afterwards as a professor, he did not want to criticise those in command. In Duguid's opinion, the regimental histories were not the place for attacking the "brass hats."

However, to conclude that the PPCLI history would be dull and sanitised would be wrong. The history was well written, individuals sprang forth from the pages, and there were many vivid passages describing the trials of war and the desperate fighting by the battalion. Bravery was almost always highlighted, especially when it resulted in the award of a medal. Certainly the officers easily found their names listed somewhere in the text. The PPCLI regimental history became a model for subsequent work, and Duguid, who was pleased with the final product, wrote to Hamilton Gault that "the history will be second to none. Until now, no regimental history has been written that is all fact and no fiction, that is full of pride but lacks bombast, that enters into detail ... and that, in spite of all, is thoroughly readable."<sup>36</sup> The success of the PPCLI regimental history ensured that Duguid and his AHS would be closely involved in overseeing subsequent histories.

33 Hodder-Williams, *Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry*, Vol. 1, xii, xix.

34 NAC, RG 24, v. 1754, DHS 10-8, corrections in Duguid to chief of general staff, 25 June 1923; Duguid quotation from Duguid to Hodder-Williams, 3 March 1924.

35 NAC, RG 24, v. 1754, DHS 10-8, Hodder-Williams to Duguid, 17 March 1924.

36 NAC, RG 24, v. 1754, DHS 10-8, Historical Section to Hamilton Gault, 5 June 1923.

Hodder-William's *Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry* received favourable reviews elsewhere too. *The Times* of London noted that “Canada...has a good right to be proud not only of her service in the ‘Great War’ but of the method of recording it which Ralph Hodder-Williams has achieved. He has produced a model for all regimental historians to follow.” John Buchan, wartime propagandist, historian, and future Canadian governor-general, also privately told Duguid that the history “compares favourably with Kiplings’s *History of the Irish Guards*,” probably the most impressive and recognisable regimental history ever written.<sup>37</sup> Not all were pleased with the history, however. J.F.B. Livesay, a wartime correspondent who became General Manager of Canadian Press, remarked to Duguid that he felt the history was a little chauvinistic and that during the last hundred days, the PPCLI had been “no better than the 47 other Canadian Infantry battalions.”<sup>38</sup>

The PPCLI was indeed no better than other Canadian units by the last year in the war, but they were the first to produce an account of their fighting based on sound scholarship. Other battalions, all fiercely proud of their accomplishments, took notice. Most regiments were anxious to have a history, but they were not easy things to create. The 2nd Canadian Mounted Rifles provide an interesting example. At their 1928 reunion in Vernon, British Columbia, a committee of ex-officers was struck to investigate how a regimental history might be published. When the expenses were estimated, the veterans of the unit were canvassed for “moral and financial support.” There was, according to the preface in the final history, “very little response” to not one but two appeals.<sup>39</sup> When an historical team was finally found and appointed, further attempts at raising money also failed. It was, after all, the Depression. In the end, the regiment turned to its former wartime colonel, G.C. Johnston, for permission to publish his personal diary, which could be used instead of a history. As a result, the regimental history, which was intended to tell the story of the thousands of men who enlisted in the battalion, was based entirely on the personal diary of the unit’s commanding officer.

Finances were not the only obstacle. Although one regimental history noted that it was “written by a soldier for soldiers and their kin,” veterans with historical training were in short supply.<sup>40</sup> Entrusting the history to a non-serving civilian historian was not a comfortable prospect, but in some cases, the desire of veterans overrode their reluctance to allow an outsider to codify their

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37 NAC, RG 24, v. 1733, DHS-1-12 (pt 2), Report of the Director, Historical Section, 11 January 1924.

38 NAC, RG 24, v. 1754, DHS 10-8, Livesay to Duguid, 11 December 1926.

39 Lt.-Col. G. Chalmers Johnston, *The 2nd Canadian Mounted Rifles [British Columbia Horse] in France and Flanders* (British Columbia: Vernon News Printing, n.d. [ca. 1932]), Preface.

40 E.S. Russenholt, *Six Thousand Canadian Men: Being the History of the 44th Battalion Canadian Infantry, 1914-1919* (Winnipeg: De Montfort Press, 1932), vii.

memories. Unable to locate a historian within their ranks, the 13th Battalion turned to a McGill registrar. Under the direction of a committee of ex-officers, Robert C. Fetherstonhaugh was commissioned to write the regimental history.<sup>41</sup> It probably eased the concerns of officers that Fetherstonhaugh would be working closely with the AHS staff. Indeed, the battalion chose its historian well, and *The 13th Battalion, Royal Highlanders of Canada* won the 1926 English History prize for best book in Canadian history. Other Canadian regimental associations, like those for the 38th or 58th battalions, were not so lucky and they failed either to find historians to carry out the work or locate the necessary resources to bring manuscripts to publication.<sup>42</sup>

Like Hodder-Williams, Fetherstonhaugh and his fellow regimental historians benefited from the AHS's guidance. Before the regimental historians commenced their task, Duguid met with them to discuss methodologies and sources. Most importantly, Duguid encouraged the historians to examine the official records and build an outline of the battalion's role in the war. Still acting in his position as guardian of the CEF's reputation and memory, Duguid told one historian that "my job is to do everything possible to put the true story of the CEF on paper."<sup>43</sup> In addition to working with the regimental historians, Duguid offered guides and other relevant works to assist these new chroniclers. Two key articles were kept on file at the AHS and were presumably included in his brief to regimental historians. The first was a 1925 editorial from *The Army Quarterly* that urged historians to write for the veterans of their unit rather than a wider audience, as the public "treat most 'war books,' and noticeably those which are of a military character, as of entirely secondary importance."<sup>44</sup> A second article in the same journal cautioned against criticising senior military strategy and suggested that the regimental history should not be used "to make a case for any particular individual or school of thought."<sup>45</sup> Supporting these written guidelines, Duguid instructed regimental historians not to embarrass their comrades or their nation. Indeed, Duguid himself worked under similar

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41 Fetherstonhaugh would eventually write three regimental histories, as well as several histories and biographies. He was confined to a wheel-chair throughout his life, and was not considered medically fit for service in the Great War. Directorate of History and Heritage (hereafter DHH), file 000.9 (D4), biography file for R.C. Fetherstonhaugh. For the assistance to Fetherstonhaugh from the AHS, see Quarterly Report ending March 1927. NAC, RG 24, v. 1733, DHS-1-12 (pt 3).

42 See the correspondence in NAC, MG 30 E153, 38th Battalion papers; and Kevin R. Shackleton, *Second To None: The Fighting 58th Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2002), preface.

43 NAC, RG 24, v. 1754, DHS 9-1, Duguid to Major Gordon Thornton, 2 Feb 1933.

44 NAC, RG 24, v. 1755, DHS 10-10 pt. 2, extract from *The Army Quarterly* X/1 (April 1925): Editorial.

45 NAC, RG 24, v. 1755, DHS 10-10 pt. 2, extract from *The Army Quarterly* X/1 (April 1925): "Divisional Histories of the Great War."

constraints. One former general even suggested to the official historian that “on contentious subjects no sides should be taken, no opinion or judgement expressed nor bias shown.” He should avoid making pronouncements as one would avoid “the deadliest poison.”<sup>46</sup> Duguid was not so easily muzzled, however, and he passed condemnation when it was warranted and refused to be bullied over his handling of the Ross rifle debacle and difficult battle of 2nd Ypres. But generally he proceeded, as most official historians before and after him have done, with restraint.<sup>47</sup>

For the most part, regimental histories were similar in structure, followed chronological events, and focused primarily on the big battles like Ypres, the Somme, and Vimy. The structural uniformity of the histories came from Duguid, who, while not doctrinaire, suggested that “any great departure from the general form is apt to be like stepping off the duckboards to walk on the parapet — all right if you don’t get hit or land in a sump hole.”<sup>48</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel C. Beresford Topp, historian for the 42nd Battalion, noted Duguid’s influence, asserting that the official historian had “outlined the general structure of the book with chapter headings, [and] read the proofs as well as the manuscript.”<sup>49</sup> Another veteran suggested that because of his important role, Duguid should be recognised as the “Patron Saint of all Regimental Histories.”<sup>50</sup> Nonetheless, each history was distinguished by its own maps, official and non-official photographs, the insertion of poems or trench songs, first-hand accounts, and even drawings from the men.

The key to getting started was to scour the war diary and war records for the sequence of unfolding events. Because historians were appointed by senior officers and ultimately reported to them through their regimental historical committees, Duguid warned that former officers should not be the first individuals to interview at the commencement of research. As he instructed: “comparatively little can be secured from participants...until a tentative draft can be laid before them; then their memories are awakened and the

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46 NAC, RG 24, v. 1504, HQ 683-1-30-5, F.O.W. Loomis to Duguid, 27 January 1937.

47 Duguid’s greatest difficulty came in the early 1930s when generals Sir Richard Turner and Garnet Hughes demanded that he rewrite sections of the official history relating to their actions during the 2nd Battle of Ypres. Duguid tried to meet their concerns but when that did not find their satisfaction, he eventually threatened to expose their blunders during the battle. Both of the generals acquiesced to the official historian. See the correspondence between Duguid and McNaughton in NAC, MG 30, E133, McNaughton Papers v. 9, file 39; and RG 24, v. 1756, file DHS 10-10 - E pt 1, Official Reply of Duguid to the comments from Major-General G.B. Hughes, 16 April 1934.

48 NAC, RG 24, v. 1754, DHS 9-1, Duguid to Major Gordon Thornton, 2 Feb 1933.

49 Lieutenant-Colonel C. Beresford Topp, *The 42nd Battalion, CEF. Royal Highlanders of Canada in the Great War* (Montreal: Gazette Printing, 1931), vii.

50 Canadian War Museum, A.F. Duguid fonds, Unprocessed material, Hamilton Gault to Duguid, 4 June 1924.

historian has an opportunity of supplementing or correcting his statements.”<sup>51</sup> However, the war diaries were not always detailed enough to provide a clear narrative of events. As one regimental historian lamented to Duguid, his unit’s war diary was a “mere record of facts without narrative or personality.”<sup>52</sup> Notwithstanding their varying degrees of accuracy or completeness, these war diaries were to be supplemented with relevant archival war records like operational and casualty reports, messages and after-battle reports.

Although it appeared that the war records were authentic reflections of the truth, they were influenced by a number of factors. For example, junior officers far from the front, who had little idea what was actually occurring, usually wrote the war diaries. The diarists relied on operational reports and hurried interviews, and the passages were crafted after long and stressful days – sometimes days after events – and they were thus liable to be inaccurate. Even more immediate records like after-battle reports and recommendations for citations were clouded by what the author could know in battle. With chaos and confusion infusing every engagement, only a tiny portion of the experience of war was recorded for posterity.

With these tools, then, the regimental historians had the burden of crafting an accurate history as well as a memorial to their fellow veterans and the gallant dead. However, with five to six thousand men passing through a battalion over three or four years, there was obviously no way that all could be mentioned by name. The officers were therefore privileged in the narrative. Of course, it was the officers who organised a board to supervise the history, and they also chose the historian. And during the writing process, several historians echoed Hodder-William’s earlier revelation that officers supplemented the official war records with their own personal papers and memories. As a result, the thousands of privates who served in the battalion generally remained nameless and indistinguishable in the text. The role of the regimental historian was a difficult one, as it is for all who write with a committee overlooking the work, but it is unfortunate that so many histories seem to have left out the enlisted men, who formed the vast majority of the battalion. Will Bird, a veteran of the 42nd Battalion and a widely-read Nova Scotian journalist, acidly wrote that regimental histories might be essential reading because of the delayed official history, but some, like his own battalion’s history, needed “a slight insertion at the beginning ‘For Officers Only’.”<sup>53</sup>

While the regimental histories were vehicles for explaining the unfolding of events, they were also tools to shape post-war beliefs. The histories provided

51 NAC, RG 24, v. 1754, DHS 9-1, Duguid to E.S. Russenholt, 12 June 1929.

52 NAC, RG 24, v. 1502, file HQ 683-1-29 pt. 4, Colonel Ibbotson Leonard to Duguid, 17 November 1931.

53 Will R. Bird, *The Communication Trench: Anecdotes & Statistics of the Great War, 1914-1918* (Ottawa: CEF Books, reprint, 2000), 58.

senior officers with a forum in which to construct the ways in which the war would be remembered. Messages of sacrifice and valour were interwoven through a text that highlighted the accomplishments of the battalion. As former Lieutenant-Colonel R.L. Ewing of the 42nd Battalion informed his fellow veterans, their regimental history would serve to counter the claims of those who were damaging the reputation of all soldiers:

It seems such a pity to me that some writers with a warped outlook, should prostitute their talents in an attempt to besmirch their comrades and unfortunately give the impression to a newer generation that the War, terrible as it was, with its bitter experiences, physical exhaustion, filth, pain and suffering, bring out as it did the best and the worst, consisted, between battles, in a series of carousals, interspersed with brutal treatment from Officers and Non-Commissioned Officers.<sup>54</sup>

With the war poets and war novelists achieving greater influence by the late 1920s, culminating with Erich Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929), the memory of the war was becoming increasingly contested and fragmented. The regimental histories allowed the soldiers, and specifically, the officers, to present their views on how the social memory of the war would be influenced or constructed. These histories provide a counter-balance to the antiwar literature of the late 1920s. Thus the war cannot be viewed exclusively through the eyes of war poets. These histories did not whitewash the war, but they did challenge the accusations, as in one bitter Canadian post-war novel, that the infantry were rampaging lunatics or that the generals were butchering incompetents.<sup>55</sup>

Although Duguid had an enormous influence on the regimental historians, he could not force them to accept changes. He did, however, have a “trump card.” As early as 1923, PPCLI founder Hamilton Gault had wanted his regiment's history to carry a “seal of approval” from the AHS. The Chief of the General Staff at the time, J.H. MacBrien, denied the request, on Duguid's advice, but he did allow the regiment to print a note informing readers that the AHS had read over the manuscript and checked it for errors. Duguid subsequently dangled this official stamp of approval before all other regimental historians, as long as they allowed his staff to read and presumably alter sections they found unacceptable.<sup>56</sup> In many cases, this process saved embarrassment,

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54 Topp, iv.

55 Harrison's *Generals Die In Bed* was the most vitriolic and notorious Canadian anti-war novel. Harrison was an American who served in the CEF. Charles Yale Harrison, *Generals Die In Bed* (New York: Morrow, 1930).

56 The caption read: “In preparing this work the author was allowed access by the Department of National Defence to all official diaries, orders, messages, maps, and other relevant documents.” See Duguid to CO, 5th Battery, 22 September 1928 (NAC, RG 24, v. 1502, file HQ



as overzealous writers would occasionally make claims such as, for example, that their battalion had never retreated. Other times it was a question of emphasis, as Duguid warned D.J. Corrigan (DSO, MC), who was writing the history of the 20th Battalion: "as a whole the book is rather out of balance in that too little space is given to the big engagements of the battalion compared with that occupied by training, line routine and minor operations." Duguid was not always able to ensure that his staff's editorial suggestions were heeded, but the AHS played an important part in ensuring that at least some standards of historical quality were achieved.

Still, as a genre, the regimental histories were uneven in quality. Duguid privately confided to one friend that the draft transcript for the 48th Highlanders (primarily about the 15th Battalion) lacked the professionalism of other regimental histories, having been written in a "sort of modern journalese, loose, hectic and flamboyant, unsuitable for conveying the ideas of orderly precision and grim reality." It was, Duguid concluded, "reminiscent of slapstick rather than of bayonet."<sup>57</sup>

In spite of the occasional problem with a published regimental history, Duguid believed that by controlling access to the war records and establishing the precedent by which he and his staff would examine all manuscripts, he could ensure that the "true story" of the war would be printed. By working with regimental historians, the editing process also allowed the AHS to influence the interpretation of problematic events. Much like Hodder-Williams, who claimed to have no desire to attack the senior commanders, very few of the later regimental historians offered condemnatory remarks. Duguid's earlier advice to regimental historians laid a foundation for cautious writing, and his correspondence and critiques of draft work were equally instructive. As Duguid suggested to one regimental historian after reading his work, "if there was internal dissension, you should find out all about it, not necessarily for publication, but without that knowledge you cannot reflect the true spirit of the battalion."<sup>58</sup> The truth had to be discovered, but that did not always mean that it should be published. "I would urge you to make sure now, as far as possible, that what you write is made reasonably safe from any who may seek to find something amiss," warned Duguid. "Someone is always looking for a sensation."<sup>59</sup> Duguid would not allow his fellow Canadian regimental historians to sully the CEF's reputation.

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683-1-29 pt. 3) for using the official disclaimer as leverage to ensure AHS received access to draft copies of the history. For inquiries into whether a regimental historian could be "trusted," see DHH, 113.302009 (D72), Colonel F.A. Lister to Military District No. 2, 2 August 1932.

57 NAC, RG 24, v. 1740, DHS 4-4, pt. 4, Duguid to Major J.M. Macdonnell, 4 September 1931.

58 NAC, RG 24, v. 1875, file 23 (18), Duguid to Corrigan, 2 December 1929.

59 NAC, RG 24, v. 1875, file 23 (12), Duguid to Major K. Weatherbe, 19 September 1928.

Duguid shaped the memory of the war by not only influencing the regimental histories, but also by controlling the war archives. If the official historian saw fit to do so, even veterans requesting access to the war records were rebuffed.<sup>60</sup> Journalist Will Bird angrily wrote that he could make his widely read newspaper accounts more accurate if he could only peruse the war records. But that information was guarded more closely “than the gold of the Mint,” he fumed, “and it is far easier to obtain a few bars of the latter than to gain access to records which should be available to any Canadian seriously seeking information.”<sup>61</sup> Duguid knew that the war records were more than simple evidence for historians – they could shape how the war would be viewed. To Duguid, making these war records available would only result in “dreadful things” happening in the “hands of those who do not understand. Until all participants are dead, they [war records] should be kept secure as far as possible from such violation.”<sup>62</sup> By editing and vetting the regimental histories, as well as denying access to the war records, Duguid exerted control over what historical evidence would be made available to the public.

As most regimental historians were veterans themselves and wrote in a constrained manner – either because of their own backgrounds, Duguid’s influence, or that of their senior officers – they were not inclined to be muck-rakers. At the same time, however, the regimental historians could not simply write patriotic drivel, as the soldiers would never accept that. As a result, they did not shy away from describing some of the grimmer aspects of the war. R.C. Fetherstonhaugh in his *13th Battalion Royal Highlanders of Canada, 1914-1919*, wrote in a fairly staid and unemotional manner, but his description of Passchendaele rings true:

The mud was appalling and the fighting for every foot of ground was so bitter as quite to defy description. Men died by the score to capture a miserable concrete “pill box,” only to have their comrades find that somewhere in the awful mud ahead lay other “pill boxes” which resolutely blocked their way to victory. No praise is too high for the courage of the men, who, at the terrible cost, pounded these miniature fortresses into submission, nor, indeed, for that of the German garrisons, who fought until the last possible moment and, in nine cases out of ten, died fighting rather than yield.<sup>63</sup>

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60 NAC, RG 24, v. 1502, file HQ 683-1-29 pt. 3, Duguid to H.S. Turner, 12 March 1929.

61 Bird, *The Communication Trench*, Preface. In another case, Wilfrid Kerr, an artillery man who became a professor at the University of Buffalo after the war, was denied access to war records when Duguid felt that his memoirs, *Shrieks and Crashes* (1929), had been an affront to officers. See the correspondence in NAC, RG 24, v. 1734, file DHS 3-2.

62 DHH, Duguid biography file, folder A, file 7, draft memo to Sir Andrew [Macphail] by Duguid, 23 May 1928.

63 R.C. Fetherstonhaugh, *The 13th Battalion Royal Highlanders of Canada, 1914-1919* (Montreal: published by the 13th Battalion, Royal Highlanders of Canada, 1925), 209.

This was no caricature of happy-go-lucky colonials trouncing the incompetent Hun. In another case, Colonel C.B. Topp's account of the 42nd Battalion's part in the offensive against the Drocourt-Quéant Line and Canal du Nord in the Last 100 Days also provides clear indication of the hard-pounding nature of combat, and refuses to downplay the costs of the advance:

The story of the Canadian Corps in this battle is one of intrepid courage and of victory, victory at tragic cost. Battalion after Battalion attacking over the open without adequate artillery preparation was caught in concealed wire and mowed down by fire from masses of machine guns manned by picked and courageous gunners....Men, hit once and stumbling, were hit again before they fell. The wounded, scattered over a wide area and many of them caught among the strands of the wire on which they had fallen, could not be moved until dusk.<sup>64</sup>

These two excerpts were not aberrations: there are similarly poignant and unique accounts of the Great War experience that can be found in the pages of all regimental histories.

Although the regimental histories are problematic works that were heavily influenced by a number of constituents, they still offer unparalleled insight into a particular aspect of the Canadian battle experience. Memoirs and official histories are useful in understanding the war, but to discern the actions of a battalion, they are either too narrow or too widely focused to offer much assistance. There is, quite simply, no better way to understand where a particular battalion was engaged and what it did, than to study the regimental histories. Regimental histories provide insight into the inner-working of a battalion, evidence that at best can be pieced together only by sifting through thousands of pages of original records in the archives, or, at worst, was never recorded at all, and thus lost for all time. Everything from morale to discipline, from the nature of fighting to the impact of weather, is given varying amounts of space in these histories. The reason behind the promotion of non-commissioned officers to the rank of officers is an important insight and is presented in several of the histories. Other less obvious events are also recorded. In describing the movement of soldiers from England to France, Captain Stewart Gorden Bennett recounted that although they were equipped with the essentials of warfare, "probably nothing was so significant in all these young soldiers' preparation as receiving their identification discs. Not even the field dressing or the rifle and its bayonet had the same sobering effect or was so indicative of the seriousness of the conflict in which they were about to participate as the reception of these little metal discs."<sup>65</sup> The issue of identification discs meant that the training was over and the fighting was about to

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64 Topp, 256.

65 Captain Stewart Gorden Bennett, MC, *The 4th Canadian Mounted Rifles, 1914-1919* (Toronto: Murray Printing Company, 1926), 8.

commence – fighting so terrible that many might only have their bodies identified by the discs they wore. Further penetrating observations can be gleaned from the letters, diary entries, or interviews that regimental historians used to colour their narratives. In short, the regimental histories provide a valuable window for those attempting to understand and reconstruct the social history of the Canadian soldier, and the unit that shaped his wartime experience.

While Duguid heavily influenced the regimental history program, he did so as a firm supporter of his fellow soldier-scholars. By assisting the regimental historians, Duguid believed that a fuller, richer picture of the Canadian war experience would be provided.<sup>66</sup> Although most official historians have been roundly abused for ignoring the enlisted men in favour of officers and generals, Duguid always saw the regimental histories as a balance to his forthcoming, overarching work. When responding to charges that his draft chapters of the first volume missed the experience of the war for the average infantryman (both enlisted men and junior officers), Duguid wrote that “it is unfortunate that the scale of the Official History and the ground it covers restricts the possibility of including many such personal acts of great valour and much interest. On the other hand it is fortunate that...the interested reader can find these recorded in the battalion histories, which both complement and supplement the wider aspects which I am called upon to present in the general history.”<sup>67</sup> Duguid was aware of the importance in providing personal stories and first-hand accounts in the official history, but realised that this could be done more eloquently and in greater detail within the regimental histories. As such, supporting the regimental history program was an essential component in ultimately providing a more balanced legacy to the men of the CEF.

While the regimental histories supplied a coherent narrative for the soldiers and filled the historiographical gap that resulted from Duguid’s delays in publishing his official history, they were also mementoes of battle. Few overseas veterans served throughout the entire conflict. As the 4th CMR regimental history noted, only two officers and thirty-four men of the original contingent of a thousand remained in the unit at the Armistice.<sup>68</sup> Those who started at 2nd Ypres or the Somme did not finish at Amiens or Mons. For such men, therefore, a history could delineate events in the war that they had not experienced or understood. Moreover, a history might, as one journalist suggested, present an opportunity for “recalling the memories of those glorious, tragic days and renewing old friendships.”<sup>69</sup> For men who had collectively sacrificed so much,

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66 NAC, RG 24, v. 1504, HQ 683-1-30-5, Duguid to Sir Richard Turner, 5 February 1937. He noted this in other occasions too: see RG 24, v. 2732, file HQS 5393, British and Canadian Official Histories of the Great War, 1914-1919, 6 April 1932.

67 NAC, RG 24, v. 1504, HQ 683-1-30-5, Duguid to Turner, 5 February 1937.

68 Bennett, *The 4th Canadian Mounted Rifles, 1914-1919*, 154-5.

69 NAC, RG 24, v. 1874, file 23, *Chronicle-Telegraph*, “The Fourteenth Battalion,” 26 May 1927.

and, during the war, relied on each other for moral and physical support, a regimental history would be another bond to draw them together in the sometimes harsh post-war years. These shared "tender memories," as General Currie wrote to one regimental historian after reading his work, were like "old family treasures that we put away and don't expose to curious gazes in company where they would not be understood. We hold fast to these cherished memories which sustain and comfort us when things go wrong."<sup>70</sup>

Yet, while the regimental histories were important sources for the living, they were also homages to the dead. Grief and commemoration pervaded every aspect of life in Canada following the Armistice. Although the war has often been viewed as a great rift between the Victorian and the modern age, the survivors often employed very traditional means of commemorating the fallen.<sup>71</sup> The war was envisaged as a noble sacrifice rather than a senseless slaughter, and these ideals were captured in memorials, plaques, and stained-glass church windows. The regimental histories fit this pattern. The veterans' association for the 44th Battalion described their regimental history as one of the "old Battalion's...three post-war operations." The first was the dedication of the Battalion colours in St. Matthew's Church in 1921, and the second was the re-erection of a monument, initially erected on the Pimple at Vimy Ridge, in St. James Park in Winnipeg.<sup>72</sup> As part of the process of imparting meaning to the war, the regimental histories played an essential part in commemorating the dead.

Most of the histories contain an honour roll of the men who lost their lives while serving with the regiment.<sup>73</sup> These long lists of names were a precursor to the Book of Remembrance and seem wholly undirected from the AHS.

70 CP, v. 15, file 43, Currie to H.M. Urquhart, 8 October 1931.

71 For the war as a great rift marking the birth of the modern, see Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (London, 1989) and Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London, 1990). For the postwar process of grieving that drew on traditional forms of commemoration, see Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Oxford, 1994) and Jonathan Vance, *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1997).

72 E.S. Russenholt, *Six Thousand Canadian Men: Being the History of the 44th Battalion Canadian Infantry, 1914-1919* (Winnipeg: De Montfort Press, 1932), v; also see H.M. Urquhart, *The History of the 16th Battalion (The Canadian Scottish)* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1932), xx.

73 Captain W.L. Gibson, *Records of the Fourth Canadian Infantry Battalion in the Great War* (The Macleans Publishing Company, 1924) is interesting because it is only an honour roll. Gibson had hoped for a more detailed history, but a number of factors delayed and eventually cancelled the history. See Andrew Iarocci, "The 'Mad Fourth': The 4th Canadian Infantry Battalion in the Great War, 1914-1916," (M.A. thesis, Wilfrid Laurier University, 2001), ii-iv. Other regimental histories, like that for the 77th, which was a unit mobilised in Ottawa and then broken up for reinforcements in England, is, necessarily, of individuals and not the battalion itself. But it too is largely based on an honour roll. See *An Historical Sketch of the Seventy-Seventh Battalion, CEF* (compiled and published by War Publications, 1926).

“Their names are gratefully enshrined in the pages of this book, as their memory is cherished by all who knew them,” intoned one regimental history.<sup>74</sup> The regimental histories drew on the language of the sacred to channel the act of commemorating the fallen. While the soldiers’ remains were left on or near the battlefields, the act of naming the dead marked a tangible representation of their sacrifice, and one available to their loved ones in Canada.<sup>75</sup> More than a few regimental historians hoped that their histories would “be a source of consolation to the proudly sorrowing hearts” of those “whose nearest and dearest fell fighting in the ranks.”<sup>76</sup> Although these regimental lists were difficult to compile and drove up the price of the books, there was, as the 16th Battalion Association noted, “never a thought of printing the book without it.”<sup>77</sup> One can almost envision grieving loved ones, opening a regimental history, anxiously turning the pages, fingers working through the text and memorial list, to settle on a familiar name. The regimental histories, these “literary memorials,” as Duguid aptly described them, were more than simply words and maps, they were the embodiment of wartime experience and sacrifice.<sup>78</sup>

When Duguid’s first volume of the official history was finally published in 1938, taking the story of the CEF up to mid-1915, it met positive reviews.<sup>79</sup> A meticulously researched and balanced piece, the history was a credit to the author and his staff. Unfortunately, it was, in the minds of many, twenty years late. The delay, claimed one reviewer, was “nationally inexcusable,” and thousands of the participants had died before getting to read even beyond the 1915 battles.<sup>80</sup> The Second World War disrupted Duguid’s work and by 1948, when it was clear to everyone that he would never finish the task, the official history program was cancelled and the war records were returned to the Public Archives of Canada, where they were made available to all.<sup>81</sup> The official

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74 Topp, 316.

75 For an exploration of this issue, see Thomas W. Laqueur, “Memory and Naming in the Great War,” in *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*, ed. John R. Gillis (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

76 Hodder-Williams, viii, xvi.

77 Vance, *Death So Noble*, 116.

78 NAC, RG 24, v. 2732, file HQS 5393, Memorandum on the Historical Section, H.Q.C.650-16-6, 5 January 1928.

79 For clippings of reviews, see NAC, RG 24, v. 1506, file HQ 683-1-30-18.

80 *Ibid.*, Z.Z. “Canada’s First Year of the War,” *Winnipeg Free Press*, 30 June 1938. For earlier calls for a history by the Legion, see L.R. LaFleche, Dominion President, Canadian Legion of the British Empire Service League, to Prime Minister Mackenzie King, 17 March 1930. NAC, RG 24, v. 2732, file HQS 5393.

81 The Department of National Defence had transferred the CEF fonds to the Public Archives of Canada in 1930, but many of the operational files were lent back to the AHS so that Duguid could finish his official history. Paul Marsden, “Shaping the Canadian Record of War in the 20th Century,” in Yves Tremblay (ed.), *Canadian Military History Since the 17th Century* (Ottawa: Department of National Defence, 2001).

historian was understandably bitter, having devoted his life to a multi-volume memorial for his fellow veterans. "I had foolishly thought that all these [surviving soldiers and politicians] were with me, and that they shared the view that we had a duty to the dead and to generations not yet born," Duguid lamented. "Am I to go to my grave with six volumes in my head?"<sup>82</sup> Indeed he was.<sup>83</sup>

The lack of an official history remained an embarrassment for the Canadian military and a critical gap in the nation's historiography. Canadians had to rely on histories produced in other countries, most notably Britain, which, not surprisingly, did not focus on the critical experience of the Canadian Corps on the Western Front, and in some cases even downplayed its accomplishments. Nonetheless, the regimental histories were there to provide some account of the Canadian experience during the war. R.C. Featherstonhaugh wrote to Duguid in 1929 that once the multi-volume official history was completed, they, along with the "unofficials" – the regimental histories – will make "a most interesting shelf of books on Canada's part in the War." In the end, the shelf was long, but it was the regimental histories that filled it.<sup>84</sup>

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Since Duguid never finished his official history, and only selectively made the war records available, the evidence of Canada's role in the Great War remained buried in the deep shelves of the AHS. It was the regimental historians to whom the legacy of crafting a first generation of historical works fell. Almost all of the regimental historians were veterans of their units, many had been decorated, and a few, like Hugh Urquhart and C.B. Topp, had risen through the ranks to command the battalion. Nonetheless, the task of regimental historians was not an easy one. Unlike the official historians who were able to insist on editorial control, there was no similar clause for regimental historians, who had a committee oversee their work and act as final arbitrator. The regimental historians had been trusted to sift through thousands of pages of documents and to create a literary memorial for the regiment. The importance of that final work meant it would be scrutinised by the men of the regiment and their families. One veteran recounted in his memoirs:

Whenever I read of another regimental history being published I doff the casque to the devoted lad who's plugged through with the work to the bitter end. It's queer how everybody's willing that the unit record should be embalmed for posterity, but nobody does anything except the chap who's had the job

82 NAC, MG 30, D252, Alan B. Beddoe papers, v. 22, file: Canadian Forces, Duguid, draft letter by Duguid to Bovey, ca. 25 February 1947.

83 Interestingly, Duguid would publish a regimental history before his death: A.F. Duguid, *History of the Canadian Grenadier Guards, 1760-1964* (Montreal: Gazette Print, 1965). Regimental histories continued to be sporadically published throughout the twentieth century.

84 NAC, RG 24, v. 1740, DHS 4-4 pt 5, R.C. Featherstonhaugh to Duguid, 8 January 1929.

## “LITERARY MEMORIALS”

wished on him. Then, when he’s through, kicking starts. The historian is told he missed out this, that and the other thing. And so it goes.<sup>85</sup>

Despite the challenge inherent in writing regimental histories, by the Second World War, there were over sixty of them available for veterans and their families.

The regimental histories resonate with images of commemoration and sacrifice, camaraderie and loss. Although they are rarely read now, it would be wrong to conclude that these histories are ephemera from a war long ended. The “drum and trumpet” school, so often derided as old-fashioned battlefield history, has much to tell us. The reconstruction and explanation of complex events – especially those that affected thousands of lives over several square kilometres in a time of utter chaos, and which would never be known in detail from the highest commander to the lowest foot soldier – is one of the essential tools of military history, and perhaps for regimental history specifically. Regimental histories, more than any other historical text, are essential for exploring a particular unit’s role in the war. Furthermore, they provide invaluable insight into the social history of the soldier on the Western Front. The regimental histories may not be the first place to turn for an understanding of the geo-politics of the war, but they do carry unique insights within their pages unavailable in other sources.

As stake-holders in guarding and crafting the social memory of the conflict, the regimental historians, while working closely with A.F. Duguid and his staff at the AHS, played an important role in memorialising and explaining the war. Although the British official historian, Sir James Edmonds, thought little of regimental historians, going so far as to call them “hacks...who wanted to earn their fees as quickly as possible, without research or investigation,” Duguid saw them as an important component in the provision of complete coverage of the Canadian Corps’ experience in the Great War.<sup>86</sup> And since the multi-volume Canadian official history was never completed, the regimental histories became, in the end, key texts in laying the foundation for historical inquiry. Moreover, because Duguid refused to give access to the war records after 1921 to anyone other than regimental historians, there was little else available for veterans and their families.

“The old Battalion does not die, but thanks to our Historian, lives on,” claimed the historical committee for the 44th Battalion Association. “Its deeds, enshrined as ever in the thoughts of those who knew it, are now writ large that other generations too many read, and pay, in days to come, some tribute to the

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85 William Waldie Murray, *Five Nines and Whiz Bangs* (Montreal: The Legionary Library, 1937), 3.

86 Australian War Memorial, Record Group 38, Charles Bean papers, 7953/item 34, Edmonds to Bean, 26 July 1935.



glory that was ours.”<sup>87</sup> Certainly, the regimental histories were heavily influenced by the AHS, and provide understanding into what the official historian was doing to protect and shape wartime reputations in the 1920s and 1930s. At the same time, these histories offer matchless insight into not only the Great War, but also the means by which combatants and their families attempted to provide meaning for this cataclysmic event that killed, maimed, or scarred so many of their contemporaries and loved ones, and forever changed their country.

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<sup>87</sup> E.S. Russenholt, *Six Thousand Canadian Men: Being the History of the 44th Battalion Canadian Infantry, 1914-1919* (Winnipeg: De Montfort Press, 1932), vii.