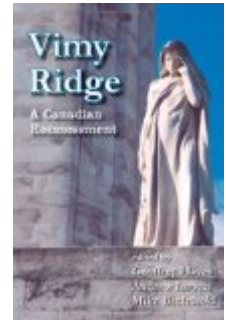


Geoffrey Hayes, Andrew Iarocci, Mike Bechthold, eds.. *Vimy Ridge: A Canadian Reassessment*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007. xiv + 353 pp. \$38.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-88920-508-6.



Reviewed by Jody Perrun

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The enduring popular view of the Battle of Vimy Ridge holds that it marked a culminating point in the development of Canadian military prowess, and as such gave birth to a new, independent Canadian national identity. By succeeding at Vimy where their erstwhile colonial masters had previously failed, Canadians emerged from national adolescence and took their rightful place as a sovereign people. The problem with any narrative that sees Canada maturing from colony to nation on the top of Vimy Ridge is that it misrepresents both the nature of the Canadian Corps' victory and exaggerates its place in Canadian constitutional development. A scholarly "re-assessment" of Canada's most heralded military achievement is thus long overdue and most welcome in this year of ninetieth anniversary celebrations.

The editors have set out to answer three basic questions: how did the Canadians come to fight at Vimy in April 1917, how did they achieve their victory, and how was our collective memory of the battle shaped? The book is divided into three corresponding sections which attempt to illumi-

nate these issues. The contributors have been drawn from a "new generation" of historians with a range of experience, from scholarly award winners to military analysts and graduate students. Perhaps to be expected, the quality of the articles is therefore somewhat uneven. Overall, the book is less a reassessment--since it does not examine previous accounts in any detail--than a revisionist history which fills in many previously neglected aspects of the battle.

The book is strongest where it considers analytical questions such as the degree to which the Corps was fully Canadian, or whether its tactics at Vimy marked a departure from previous battles on the western front. In part 1 the authors situate the Canadian attack within the wider context of the Battle of Arras, which has been largely overlooked by historians despite the attention lavished on the Canadian performance of April 9-12, 1917. Gary Sheffield's complaint that "Canadian nationalism has led to an exaggerated sense of the importance of the capture of Vimy Ridge and the British elements of the force that fought in the battle have been airbrushed out of popular mem-

ory" (p. 27) has the ring of truth, but his point is somewhat ironic given the British tendency to do likewise when it came to giving full credit to the military contributions of the Empire and Commonwealth. Still, the authors emphasize the fact that it was an imperial force (with supporting British infantry, artillery, and engineers), not one exclusively Canadian, that took the ridge.

Even within the Canadian Corps, the majority of soldiers (49 percent) were not native-born but first-generation British immigrants to Canada. In its headquarters, too, the formation owed a great debt to Britain, which supplied most of its senior staff officers at Vimy and throughout the war. Lt. Gen. Julian Byng, the corps commander, is overshadowed in our collective memory by Arthur Currie, who commanded the 1st Canadian Infantry Division at Vimy and took command of the Corps shortly after. But it was Byng who turned around a demoralized organization, with a "faction-ridden and politicized" (p. 88) officer cadre, following the disastrous battle for the St-Eloi craters in the spring of 1916 and shepherded it through difficult baptisms of fire at Mount Sorrel and the Somme later in the year. Byng was responsible for a majority of the key officer appointments in the Corps, and he successfully resisted perpetuating the sort of cronyism that flourished under the influence of Sam Hughes. Under Byng's influence merit-based promotion put the right man in the job much more frequently than hitherto.

The Vimy legend makes much of Canadian tactical innovations and a new approach to training in preparation for the attack. Currie recommended a number of changes in the methods of planning major operations after studying the lessons learned by the French at Verdun. But as Paul Dickson explains, "Currie did not make his observations in a vacuum" (p. 44), and many of the methods he suggested had already been implemented within British as well as Canadian divisions. This in no way diminishes the achievement.

It was the Corps' thorough preparation, soon to become its hallmark, which ensured success, as well as the familiarity and degree of teamwork made possible by the permanency of its composition. The latter was nearly unique among other corps of the British Expeditionary Force, the divisions of which were routinely shifted to other formations as circumstances dictated.

Although part 2 sets out to explain the methods by which the Canadian Corps fought and won the Vimy battle, at ten to fifteen pages each they are generally too short to provide detailed coverage. This is compensated in part by the inclusion of essays on the artillery, engineers, and medical personnel which return the supporting arms to a story usually dominated by the infantry. The most effective chapters are those which avoid the temptation to be comprehensive and instead define a clear analytical perspective, as David Campbell does in arguing that 2nd Division's success on Easter Monday was achieved by the "meticulous preparation" (p. 171) that allowed it to minimize the sort of mistakes that proved so costly at St-Eloi and the Somme. Andrew Godefroy's analysis of the 4th Division's difficulty in taking the ridge's highest ground is one of the few that actually provides the sort of reassessment suggested by the book's title, by identifying some of the shortcomings of the official history in explaining the slow progress on the left flank. These chapters, along with Tim Cook's examination of the fire plan, make clear above all else the importance of artillery in determining the battle's outcome. The number of guns used at Vimy was "unsurpassed" in previous operations, and "double that used on the Somme" (p. 196). The infantry advanced quickly where the artillery managed to cut the wire in front of them, and they took much heavier casualties where it had not, as on the 4th Division's front.

As J. L. Granatstein recently commented in *Legion Magazine*, this volume is "relentlessly tactical" in its coverage.[1] The reason is logical: to

better explain why some divisions had more success than others during the battle of Arras, the editors point out that "we would do well to study less the nationality of these troops and more the ground over which they attacked" (p. 314). Certainly, however a more comprehensive selection of maps would have been appreciated, especially a detailed trench map for the chapter on the 4th Division. But the tactical focus means the book is found wanting in the area of historiography, and notably absent is a more detailed historiographical survey of how Vimy has taken its place in Canadian culture. As Patrick Brennan argues, Byng and the other British officers in the Corps did not receive due credit for their contribution to either the Vimy Ridge operation or the Canadian victories that followed because "their input into...the Corps' professionalization makes no contribution to the nationalist agenda of Canadian military history" (p. 95). This is the most salient point made in any of the book's eighteen chapters, and it begs in vain for a probing follow-up.

Part 3 does go part way towards such a follow-up, however. Jacqueline Hucker's chapter covering the process by which Vimy was selected for memorialization and the monument's creation briefly sketches a familiar story, at least to specialists. Serge Durflinger recalls the outrage that greeted rumors of the memorial's destruction under German occupation from 1940 to 1944 in another of the book's better pieces. Both reveal something of Vimy's significance to Canadians in the first three decades after the battle. The "idea of Vimy Ridge as the crucible of the Canadian nation" (p. 275) had already started to take hold during that time period, and Jonathan Vance suggests that it may have grown from the pens of multitudinous poets of varying skill who commemorated the event in verse. But the reassessment seems incomplete without a more detailed examination of how the Vimy mythology has been fashioned over the last ninety years. Dave Inglis provides just such an examination in his Master's thesis, "Vimy Ridge: 1917-1992, A Canadian Myth over

Seventy Five Years".[2] By tracing accounts of the battle in news media, school textbooks, and historical works, Inglis reveals how Vimy became a symbol of national unity, manipulated by writers, historians, and politicians to suit various political and educational purposes. The symbol, Inglis argues, ultimately failed to resonate with all Canadians because of Vimy's close relationship to the conscription crisis and the generally divisive nature of the Great War for a country with a multi-ethnic population. This is the sort of reassessment one might reasonably have expected from the book's title, and its omission leaves a significant gap.

Geoffrey Hayes, Andrew Iarocci, and Mike Bechthold, nonetheless, have delivered a worthy addition to a body of literature that is disproportionately small in relation to the magnitude of Vimy's contribution to Canadian nationalism. The authors have managed to clarify some persistent misconceptions about the Canadian Corps and have clearly demonstrated the value of ongoing study of this monumental event.

Notes

[1]. J. L. Granatstein, "Off the Shelf," *Legion Magazine*, (May/June 2007): 87.

[2]. Dave Inglis, "Vimy Ridge: 1917-1992, A Canadian Myth Over Seventy Five Years" (MA thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1995).

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