During the Second World War, the Canadian Army aimed to recruit and commission young men with an enigmatic quality known as “officer material.” Identifying potential for good leadership reflected the social beliefs, cultural assumptions, and scientific standards behind what military officials believed constituted both being a good officer and being a good man. Through an evolving system of selection and training, the army sought to produce competent lieutenants responsible for, among other duties, enforcing discipline, maintaining morale, and leading troops on the battlefields of Europe. In *Crerar’s Lieutenants*, the 2017 C. P. Stacey Award winner, Geoffrey Hayes explores this unique and understudied history through what he terms the invention of the Canadian junior officer. Using a range of sources including training materials, letters, and memoirs, Hayes explains how many young Canadian men negotiated the responsibilities of holding a commission with their own wartime experiences and the army’s expectations. His research deepens our understanding of the creation of the Canadian Army as a fighting force while also uncovering the fascinating social and gender dynamics that defined leadership from platoon and company levels.

Hayes structures the book largely chronologically from the foundations of the Canadian officer corps in the interwar Permanent Force to the promotion and training of officers in the Second World War through to their intense experiences fighting in northwest Europe. The reader comes to understand how the ideal image of an army officer changed as the war progressed. A 1939 advertisement depicting a tailored cavalry officer in riding breeches (p. 14) creates a striking visual contrast with a 1944 photo of Victoria Cross recipient Major David Currie in unpretentious, ordinary battle dress (p. 191). Through the important influence of General Harry Crerar, the Canadian Army placed an emphasis on merit, technical proficiency, and scientific metrics in the selection of its junior officers. As Hayes points out, even as the army claimed to have evolved from aristocratic notions of wealth and class in determining whom
it commissioned, the weight placed on higher education tended to benefit men from fairly affluent or socially connected families. The influence of middle-class morals and sensibilities in turn shaped how officers attempted to live up to their rank in both their private conduct and public performance.

An army officer was defined by his rank and commission; however, as Hayes effectively argues, his role also reflected fundamental ideas about masculinity in the military culture. Through propaganda and official policies, the Canadian Army promoted an idealized image against which actual officers could be measured. The model officer took many forms. The imperial, aristocratic image had survived the trenches of the Great War to continue to exert a powerful influence as the classic officer and gentleman in the interwar Permanent Force and the wartime British Army. The image of the arrogant German officer in an iconic SS uniform meanwhile represented an archetypal enemy ideal. Against these two hypermasculine images, Hayes locates the idealized form of officership in the Canadian Army within a temperate heroic mold. He details how officers adapted to their leadership roles in ways that at times conformed to societal expectations of stoic masculinity while also subverting a hypermasculine ideal with self-effacing rhetoric and humor.

Hayes's deep research and extensive knowledge on the topic provides a nuanced appraisal of Canadian officers and their diverse wartime experiences. He explains how men adjusted to the realities of front-line duty after undergoing training that at times emphasized arcane notions of etiquette and good character. Many proved themselves fine and courageous leaders once under fire, but the few Victoria Crosses for infantry officers only pointed to how the nature of modern war had changed. The mechanics behind success or failure on the battlefield often depended on aptitude for logistics and organization rather than on individual heroism. The horrific casualties suffered by junior officers also reveals how these men attempted to negotiate the dangers of battle while living up the responsibilities demanded of their rank. Meanwhile, those left out of battle or debilitated by illness needed to reconcile missing combat with the temperate heroic model. Some deemed inefficient or unsuited found themselves before a reclassification board where they risked losing their commissions and even the possibility of conscription in the ranks. Hayes rightly includes the experiences of these men to highlight the range of challenges encountered by officers deemed to have fallen short and the precarious position of many privileged to hold the king's commission.

The book's focus is largely (but not exclusively) on English-speaking, combat officers in infantry and armored regiments. Although Hayes details the difficulties faced by French Canadian officers, particularly those subject to the reclassification system, few sources directly related to francophone officers are featured in detail. Although possibly beyond the scope of a work focused on masculinity and officership, the book might have included more on the unique experiences of female officers negotiating their roles in the Canadian Women's Army Corps. The focus on front-line officers also risks to some degree overshadowing the many officers who performed administrative, legal, and medical duties. Further detail on how officers assigned to no-combat roles fit the image of temperate heroism would have offered an interesting addition to an already fine piece of scholarship.

As Hayes points out, the experiences of junior officers have been largely overshadowed in the historiography in comparison to studies on ordinary soldiers or a commanding general like Crerar himself. In this thoroughly interesting and well-researched book, Hayes offers a much-needed corrective to this omission. From Crerar's Lieutenants, the reader comes to understand the vital role played by Canadian junior officers in the Second
World War and better appreciate the sacrifices so many of them made.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-war


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=56565

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.