

Report of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association Rapport de l'assemblée annuelle de la Société historique du Canada

Report of the Annual Meeting

The Nature of an Official History

C. P. Stacey

Volume 25, Number 1, 1946

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/290019ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/290019ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0317-0594 (print)

1712-9095 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Stacey, C. P. (1946). The Nature of an Official History. *Report of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association / Rapport de l'assemblée annuelle de la Société historique du Canada*, 25(1), 74–83. <https://doi.org/10.7202/290019ar>

THE NATURE OF AN OFFICIAL HISTORY

By COLONEL C. P. STACEY

Director of the Army Historical Section

My chief object today is to describe and discuss the plans which have been made for the preparation of an Official History of the Canadian Army's part in the recent war, and some of the special problems that arise in connection with it. I hope, however, that I shall be forgiven if I stray beyond these bounds and attempt also some more generalized discussion of the nature of official military histories, the theories that appear to have inspired those produced in the past, and the broad problems and functions of that special and perhaps somewhat peculiar class of historians who are employed by the state.

A rapid glance at the history of official histories indicates that the state became involved in historiography—as in a good many other forms of activity—only in comparatively recent times. British soldiers succeeded in defeating the armies of Louis XIV and Napoleon without the assistance of official accounts of earlier wars, and apparently felt no need for the preparation of any chronicle of their own exploits beyond that contained in their own despatches. The cult of official history as it has developed in more modern times is clearly a product of the steadily increasing complexity of war and of the growing recognition of the practical contribution which the scientific study of warfare is likely to make to success on the battlefield. The Germans, as is not surprising, set the example. "Before every man who would be a Leader of Armies," said their great strategist Schlieffen in 1910 "lies a book entitled 'The History of War'." The Prussian General Staff was preparing studies of the Seven Years' War and the Napoleonic Wars as early as the eighteen-twenties; the Austrians produced, beginning in 1863, an official account of the campaigns of Prince Eugene; and both Prussians and Austrians prepared rival official histories of their war against each other in 1866 as soon as it was over.

British undertakings of this sort were few and sporadic until the close of the Victorian era. The first actual British official history of a complete campaign seems to have been the "Record" of the Abyssinian Expedition of 1867-8 which was produced by the Topographical and Statistical Department of the War Office in 1870. There was as yet no General Staff and no Historical Section. These things came into existence only in the course of the fundamental and salutary reorganization of the British military system, which was undertaken (largely on German models) at the close of the South African War. As a result of the recommendations of the Esher Committee (1904), a proper General Staff was organized, and one of its functions as defined by the Committee was the supervision of work on military history. The actual preparation of major histories was normally carried out, however, on the Cabinet, rather than the departmental level; the Committee of Imperial Defence came into existence in 1903, and the Historical Section subsequently set up was incorporated in its secretariat.

A perfect spate of official histories now set in. A very detailed *History of the War in South Africa, 1899-1902* was "compiled by direction of His Majesty's Government" and published in 1906-10. A British Official History of the Russo-Japanese War was produced shortly afterwards. Even minor campaigns received attention: for instance, in 1907 the War Office produced an Official History of the recent operations against the Mad Mullah in Somaliland.

All these somewhat elaborate productions were evidently primarily designed to serve a rather limited military purpose: the effective study of campaigns by prospective commanders and staff officers. The same object was, presumably, the dominant consideration in planning the series of detailed and admirable histories which has since been produced by the Historical Section of the Committee of Imperial Defence in connection with the Great War of 1914-19. Those volumes are doubtless familiar to this audience. They come from many different hands and are necessarily, therefore, somewhat uneven in quality and style; but they are an invaluable mine of accurate information concerning the operations of the British Armies and their adversaries in that tremendous conflict. Some of them are distinctly "readable" in the sense of being interesting for more than the mere information they contain; for example, anyone with an eye for good writing and an appreciation of historical drama could certainly read General Aspinall-Oglander's volumes on Gallipoli with both pleasure and profit. Nevertheless, it may be questioned whether many people apart from soldiers and military students have read these histories at all, let alone read them with care. Even among army officers, I think it safe to say, they have served chiefly as works for occasional reference.

These Official Histories of the past are productions which compel respect. Their authors kept before them the highest ideals of accuracy and completeness. They are supported by detailed documentary appendices of great value to students of strategy, tactics, and military administration; and they are illustrated by very numerous and very detailed maps.

Thanks to these very excellences, however, the writing of these histories has been expensive in both time and money. The production of history on such lines is a slow business, and it has unfortunately become steadily slower as wars have grown larger and more complex and the paper records of them have assumed more and more mountainous proportions. The Official History of the South African War was completed only in 1910, eight years after the Treaty of Vereeniging; and when the second war with Germany broke out in 1939 the British Official History of the first one, which had ended twenty-one years before, was still some distance from completion. Our own Canadian experience serves to illustrate the difficulties. Colonel A. Fortescue Duguid, who had been Director of the Historical Section of the General Staff since 1921, was formally appointed Official Historian in 1932; and he found himself charged with many other tasks besides the enormous one of distilling an Official History from the mass of military papers left over from the war. The consequence was that Volume I of the General Series of the Official History appeared only in 1938. This volume was one of the soundest pieces of historical work ever produced in Canada. But before Volume II was ready for the press another war broke out, and the Historical Section assumed various func-

tions connected with the immediate crisis and was forced to suspend work on the War of 1914-19. The Department of National Defence and the Canadian commanders thus entered the new war without the advantage — which would not have been wholly insignificant — of having for their guidance a complete organized account of the problems encountered by Canadians in the previous war and the manner in which those problems were overcome. The British and Canadian policy on Official Histories had not succeeded in meeting in full measure the strictly military needs which it was designed to serve.

In the light of this experience, the problem has been reconsidered during the months since the defeat of Germany and Japan. Both soldiers and civilians, in both Canada and the United Kingdom, have questioned the value of histories so detailed that they take decades to produce and, when produced, reach only a limited public; and the opinion appears to be pretty generally held that, whether or not a very detailed history is ultimately published, there should be an immediate effort to make available at the earliest possible date an authentic *outline* history for the information of the public (including the men who fought, whose ideas of the large pattern of events to which their own local efforts contributed are often extremely vague). Such an outline, while less valuable for military purposes than the detailed histories which cannot in any case be completed for years to come, would have some utility for official reference and for the purposes of military instruction. This point of view has been accepted in the United Kingdom. A recent discussion in the British House of Commons served to advise the public that the British government proposes to produce at an early date a series of "popular" histories along these lines; at a later time, presumably, an Official History of a more traditional type may see the light.

In Canada there are clearly particularly cogent arguments for a similar policy. We Canadians, in this twentieth century, have been obliged by circumstances to devote an extraordinarily large proportion of our time and our national resources to the business of waging war. We nevertheless remain a very unmilitary people — more so, even, than the people of the United Kingdom. Canadian literature on questions of defence scarcely exists at all; and many Canadians, in spite of having lived through two great wars, display a degree of ignorance on military matters great and small that sometimes seems hardly credible. Now from some points of view this is, at least superficially, a happy situation; it reflects the comfortable divorcement of our Canadian small-town past from the turmoil of world politics. (In the town of Mariposa, one remembers, Stephen Leacock found only one small evidence of military activity: the "pictures of South Africa and the departure of the Canadians" that hung on Judge Pepperleigh's library wall.) No sane man would care to see this easy-going traditional civilianism replaced by any sort of militarism, Prussian or quasi-Prussian. *That*, however, is a singularly improbable development; and it seems legitimate to argue that the people of modern Canada, a country whose young men have fought two bloody wars within the space of a single generation, a country which claims the status of at least a "middle" power in world affairs, a country which has lately found itself obliged to increase its peace-time military establishments quite materially, now require to be far better informed than they have been in the past on military matters.

They will have to go on forming judgments on such matters for many years to come; and if they are to form judgments worthy of an intelligent democracy, they must surely have available, for their guidance and consideration, authentic summaries of recent military history in a form comprehensible by the ordinary citizen. I have had no hesitation, in these circumstances, in recommending that our Official Army Histories should be written for a wide rather than a narrow audience — for all Canadians interested in public affairs, rather than merely for officers and military students.

The question may of course be asked, if histories are to be addressed to the general public, why should they be *official* histories at all? The answer is, I think, fairly obvious. It is the earnest hope of the Canadian General Staff that Canadian historical scholars in the future will be much more disposed than in the past to work on military subjects; and such scholars can count, now and always, on the fullest assistance possible from the Historical Section. Nevertheless, it must be clear that there are a good many considerations which make it impossible to accord civilian scholars anything but very limited access to our recent military records for some time to come. The choice, therefore, so far as the use of official records is concerned, is between histories produced officially and no histories at all.

The project for the Official History of the Canadian Army in the War of 1939-45 which the Minister of National Defence has approved, provides for publication by stages. What may for convenience be called the first stage, which is not formally part of the Official History at all, is already virtually completed. During the last period of the war the Department of National Defence decided to publish, under the title, "The Canadian Army at War," a series of informative booklets modelled on those produced by the United Kingdom Ministry of Information for the various service Departments. Our booklets were written by the Historical Section of the General Staff. The war had ended before the first of them, *The Canadians in Britain, 1939-44*, could reach the booksellers; but it was decided to proceed with the idea, which offered the best means of placing authentic official information about our Army's work before the public at an early date. *The Canadians in Britain* was finally published in November, 1945. The second booklet, *From Pachino to Ortona*, appeared in January of this year; and the third, *Canada's Battle in Normandy*, is now on the verge of publication. These little books, published by the King's Printer in an attractive *format* with numerous illustrations, cost only 25 cents for the paper-bound edition, and 50 cents for the cloth one; the object has been to make it possible for every Canadian to own them if he wants to; and by the middle of May a total of some 15,000 copies had been distributed, chiefly by public sale.

To cover the whole of the Army's part in the war in booklets of this sort would be a considerable undertaking and would interfere with other historical work of a more formal nature. As it is, the three published booklets cover the static period in England and the opening phases of our two main campaigns. It has accordingly been decided not to extend this series further. Instead we will concentrate upon the production, for publication at the earliest possible date, of a comprehensive Official Historical Sketch covering in one volume, in broad outline, what seem the most im-

portant activities of the Canadian Army in the late war. Such a volume clearly cannot include everything; and it is accordingly to be primarily a story of activities *overseas*, and in the main a story of *campaigns*. Questions of organization and policy will be dealt with, at this stage, only to the extent necessary to provide a framework to hold the narrative of operations together. The Sketch will be written in a manner designed to be comprehensible by the most unmilitary reader; like the booklets already published, it will be made as attractive as possible in both *format* and price; it will be illustrated with paintings by Canadian War Artists; and we hope that it will be possible to place it in the hands of the public about a year from now. Of the ten chapters proposed, three are already drafted.

It is obvious, of course, that this Sketch can be only an interim report. It will be too brief, and published too early, to be complete in any respect whatever. It will be a summary based mainly upon an incomplete examination of our own sources of information; for there is no hope that by the time it goes to press we will have been able to prepare complete "preliminary narratives" from our own documents, let alone the enormous mass of German papers which have only lately begun to become available for consultation. But it will be something; and it will perhaps be useful to general historians, and particularly I hope to those who write history for the schools.

The final stage of the Official History is envisaged as a work in four volumes, to be published, we hope — I say we hope — in about five years. The proposed arrangement of the volumes, at present purely tentative, is as follows. Volume I will deal with the concentration of the Canadian Army Overseas in the United Kingdom and with events in Britain and operations based on Britain previous to the beginning of our two main campaigns. The chief operational highlight will be the Dieppe raid. Volume II will tell the story of the Canadian campaigns in Sicily and Italy. Volume III will deal similarly with the campaign in North-West Europe in 1944-5. Volume IV will be concerned with general military policy as it affected the growth, organization, and employment of the Canadian Army; with events in and about Canada; and with operations based on Canada, including Hong Kong and Kiska.

It will be apparent that this "final" history is still not conceived as a work written in tremendous detail. The person who wishes to know where a certain platoon of a certain battalion was at a certain hour will be referred to the regimental historian (and in the light of the considerable number of regimental histories already published, and the many others known to be projected, he may not be disappointed). But it is hoped to produce a book, based upon wide examination of both Allied and enemy sources, which, *in essentials*, will be both complete and accurate. It will still, like the preliminary Sketch, be directed mainly at the intelligent general reader rather than the military student; it will be written in a strictly non-technical manner and will leave specialized aspects to be dealt with in separate studies; but it is hoped nevertheless that it will not be without value to the Canadian Staff College and to other institutions of military education.

The basis of this Official History will be the detailed preliminary narratives which are already far advanced and which were in fact well begun before the end of hostilities. It must be emphasized that we should have

no hope whatever of completing the history within the limits of time which I have suggested, had it not been for the historical work carried on during the war both in Canada and overseas. This work has been described in an article in the *Canadian Historical Review*, September, 1945, and there is no need to dwell further upon it here. It must be pointed out, however, that this preparatory work is one very great advantage which the historians of the War of 1939-45 have had over those of the preceding one. These detailed preliminary narratives, which have been in preparation since 1942, are really organized summaries of the evidence. They are not intended for publication and will never be published; but they will be permanently available for official reference and will afford military officers and other public servants much information which is too confidential, too technical, or simply too dull for inclusion in a history intended primarily for the general reader.

One special point is worthy of mention. The war was won by inter-service co-operation; and from every point of view it is important that the history should register this fact in unmistakable terms. Indeed, if it were practicable, it would be desirable that there should be one history for the three services, not three separate histories; but in Canada it is not practicable. The Canadian Army always watched with more than ordinary interest the operations of its sister Canadian services; and I doubt whether those sister services have ever fully realized just how deep and genuine was the satisfaction which Canadian soldiers felt on the occasions when they found themselves supported by Canadian naval vessels or units of the R.C.A.F. Unfortunately, those occasions were all too few. The Army's path seldom crossed that of the R.C.N. (D Day in Normandy was one of the brilliant and very satisfactory exceptions); and while we saw rather more of the R.C.A.F. we never saw as much as we should have liked. (For some reason, it was 84 Group, R.A.F., which supported the First Canadian Army in North-West Europe; 83 Group, which contained the Canadian units, went to the Second British Army.) So we really have no choice; we have three separate stories to tell, and we must write three separate histories.

In the preparation of these preliminary studies, and in every other aspect of our work, we have had the immeasurable advantage of the services of a staff largely composed of trained and experienced professional historians, accustomed to the business of producing coherent narratives from vast and apparently unmanageable masses of source material. Many of these scholars are now returning to the universities or to other civil employment. It is proper at this time and place to acknowledge the Army's deep debt to these people. Their work will continue to bear fruit as the volumes of the History are published year by year.

The problem of organization to provide for writing the history of the War of 1939-45 in the shortest possible time, while simultaneously completing that of the War of 1914-19 and carrying on the considerable miscellaneous work of the Historical Section, has been carefully considered. The solution adopted by the Chief of the General Staff has been to set Colonel Duguid free from the general duties connected with the appointment of Director of the Historical Section in order that he may devote the whole of his attention to his work as Official Historian of the War of 1914-19.

The publication of additional volumes of the history of that war may now be expected at early dates. At the same time, I have been appointed Official Historian of the Canadian Army for the War of 1939-45, combining this appointment with that of Director. To prevent the recurrence of a situation in which miscellaneous duties interfere seriously with the actual work of writing, the Section has been provided with an Executive Officer of senior rank, whose duty it is to carry the burden of administration and in general to supervise all the functions of the Section not directly connected with the production of history for publication. For the moment, the bulk of our Canadian operational records remains in England and our narratives of operations are being drafted there, while work on policy aspects is done in Ottawa.

In spite of all the work already done, the task confronting us is of staggering proportions. The mass of documents which must be sifted is so huge as to defy adjectival description. The papers relating merely to the detail of Canadian operations are in all conscience vast enough in themselves; we have in our hands approximately 100,000 Canadian monthly war diaries, and many of them are very large. (They fill 600 cabinets at Ottawa today, and there are hundreds more in London.) But we have also to relate our own operations to those of the forces of other countries, and particularly to place them in the proper framework with respect to higher Allied command; this means reference to the voluminous British and American sources, though it is hoped that consultation of the narratives prepared by our opposite numbers at London and Washington will meet most of our needs. Discussion of questions of policy involves the examination of many thousands of files at all levels, ranging from those of field divisions to those of government departments at Ottawa. And, finally, we must provide for investigating the papers collected by an enemy who, fortunately or unfortunately, was remarkably diligent and systematic in recording events, and whose vast accumulations of military records are now in Allied hands. I think it well to admit that we shall never be able to read *all* these various papers in detail; to do so would take at least fifty years. But we must do our best to ensure that no document really significant for our purposes goes unnoticed. We shall try to keep before us that law of diminishing returns well known to every historian; we will not suspend our researches on any subject, if we can help it, until they have reached the point where the returns from the investigation have ceased to be really important.

Another form of evidence is the personal recollections of participants. During the war, Historical Officers in the field interviewed hundreds of officers and other ranks who possessed special knowledge, and the memoranda of these interviews are valuable sources of information. Since the fighting ended, we have talked to many more individuals about incidents on which, for some reason, documentary evidence is fragmentary. It is our custom, also, to circulate accounts of operations in draft to various participants to obtain their comments. (Our experience so far, however, is that such comments only occasionally add materially to our knowledge.) The incidents on which personal evidence has been most valuable have been those operations where many men became prisoners. In such cases we were able to obtain full details of the action only after the return of

these men, or some of them. For example, various aspects of the Dieppe raid (notably the action of the tanks) remained obscure until the repatriation of our first group of prisoners in October, 1943.

The personal recollections of individuals long after the event occasionally constitute something of a problem. Mr. Dooley once gave advice to historians which was very sound. I quote from memory; but my recollection is that he said, "If ye *must* write history, be sure to write the history iv remote periods; ye will be much less liable to interruptions by thim that were there." Unfortunately, an Official Historian in the circumstances which I have outlined cannot act on this excellent counsel; and already we are growing accustomed to interruptions. The interrupters, however, sometimes fail, to a somewhat remarkable extent, to agree among themselves; and their disagreement with the written records is frequently even wider. On the whole, our experience merely reinforces an ancient maxim: two sentences scrawled on a scrap of paper on the evening of the battle are worth two thousand words of comment produced two years later. I should be sorry, nevertheless, to give the impression that our critics and commentators have been ill-natured or that we are ungrateful to them. We have received, on the whole, quite as much charity as we deserve; and the deep and helpful interest which many soldiers and ex-soldiers have taken in our work is one more evidence of the peculiar historical-mindedness of the Canadian Army.

The topics which the historian must treat are as various as the sources are vast. They range from strategy and high policy at one extreme to tactical and administrative detail at the other; so that the historian may find himself dealing, one week, with the allied strategic problem in the Normandy bridgehead, or with the overall employment of the Canadian Army; while the next week he may be concerned with the question of how many tanks got over the sea-wall at Dieppe, or the condition of the plumbing in certain barracks at Aldershot during the famous winter of 1939-40. Relating Canadian operations and activities to the larger general picture of the Allied effort is a particularly thorny problem. It is not our business, very fortunately, to write the whole history of the war; and yet we *must* write so much of it as will serve to indicate why things were done, to prevent any impression that the Canadians were operating in a vacuum, and to establish the manner in which their efforts contributed to the common victory. Of all the aspects of our complicated task, this perhaps is the one calling for the surest judgment and the highest degree of art.

I have said enough to indicate that the writing of an Official History of the Canadian Army in the war of 1939-45, considered merely from an academic point of view, constitutes an extraordinarily absorbing and complex exercise in historiography. The task, however, is not one that can be comprehended within the limits of any such point of view. We have to tell, for the Canadians of today and of days to come, the story of a tremendous human enterprise—the part played by Canada in the defence of freedom against the bloodiest tyrannies of modern times. It was the greatest undertaking in our national history, and in that undertaking the Army's part was—shall we say—one of some eminence. In no previous conflict did the military forces of Canada serve in so many lands and in such varied roles. Canadian soldiers fought the Japanese in Asia and the Germans and Italians

in Africa. They took part in expeditions to the Arctic archipelago of Spitsbergen and to the fog-bound Aleutians; they did duty from Iceland to the coast of South America; they helped to extend the rock-hewn defences of Gibraltar. They were among the foremost of the defenders of the United Kingdom in the dark time when it was Europe's last citadel of freedom. They bore the brunt of the largest and most significant of the Allies' raids against that continent's bristling coast in the days when the arrogant enemy controlled it from the North Cape to the Pyrenees. Above all, they played great parts in two of the three European campaigns which produced the total defeat of Hitler's Germany; they fought for twenty grim and glorious months in Sicily and Italy, and were in the front of the fight in the last mighty struggle in North-West Europe from the Norman beaches to Luneburg Heath. It is an imperial theme; such an outpouring of courage, skill, and energy, with the whole map of the world and the most shattering political upheaval in human records for its background, would seem to be material for poetry rather than for the slow pen of the military historian. Some day, perhaps, the poet will arise who can do it justice; in the meantime, the historian can only do his best.

What a weight of responsibility, then, falls upon those people who, with what must seem almost incredible temerity and presumption, take it upon themselves to write the history of that Army! It is no light thing to venture, the making of a book worthy of the men who fought the lonely battle at Hong Kong and waged the grim encounter on the shingle of Dieppe; who routed the paratroops from the ruins of Ortona and beat the fanatical S.S. back mile by mile down the long road to Falaise; who broke the Hitler and Gothic Lines; who opened the Scheldt and cleared the Hochwald; who battled in the mountains of Sicily, on the flats of the Lombard Plain and the polders of Holland, and through the German forests; who won too many victories to catalogue, and brought credit to their country wherever they set the print of their hobnailed boots. This army is already almost a thing of the past. Many thousands of those who made its reputation lie in foreign fields; and the survivors are dispersed about the Dominion and the world. It is for us to ensure that their countrymen do not forget the things they did. It will not be easy to find words to tell the story. There are times when phrases out of the past seem more suitable than anything found in modern speech; and we propose to set upon the flyleaf of this history, words written by Lord Howard of Effingham of the men whom he led out to meet the Armada in 1588:

God send me to see such company again
when need is.

DISCUSSION*

Professor Preston pointed out that there was a good deal of certain kinds of information concerning personalities, motives for action, and the like that is interesting and important but which cannot be included in any official histories. He cited one striking instance. The three speakers all agreed.

Professor Trotter remarked that Professor F. H. Underhill, President

of the Canadian Historical Association, was the first historian to record the Canadian military effort of the last World War.

Mr. Lightbody discussed the present attempts being made in the United States to co-ordinate the work of all defence forces in one government department as one of the results of war experience. He noted that the Navy was most hostile to these efforts.

Professor Rolph wished to know if any attempt was to be made in the projected one-volume history of the Canadian Army's part in this war to evaluate the measure of success achieved by the Canadians.

Colonel Stacey replied that it was too early to express many opinions on this subject. Possibly there would be some attempt to evaluate in the larger history to appear in five years' time. However, the real job of the Official Military Historian is to show what actually happened. In so doing, he can pave the way for freer commentary and assessment by others.

Mr. W. G. Bassett affirmed that the problem of convoys went back to 1690 so far as the British navy was concerned. He stated that the "naval mind" had been a major problem in creating a new system of convoy protection.

Mr. J. Spring suggested that in the United States there was a more civilian attitude than in Canada or Great Britain towards the selection of officers. This is indicated, he said, in the readiness to use all educational means in the selection.

Colonel Stacey indicated that such aspects of the Canadian mind as the last speaker was concerned with could best be investigated by civilians when the military historians had provided the material.

Professor Wilkinson commended Colonel Stacey upon the speed with which the Army Historical Section was carrying on its work, but suggested that there ought to be better publicity for the short, popular volumes that are being issued by this Section.

Colonel Stacey replied that all credit for the efficiency of this Section was due to the foresight of the leaders of the Canadian Army, who saw from the beginning the need for competent historical recording of Canadian military efforts.

*This discussion also refers to the two following articles on related subjects: "Some Aspects of the Battle of the Atlantic" by Gilbert Norman Tucker; and "The Evolution of the Royal Canadian Air Force" by Wing Commander F. H. Hitchins.