

THE RELUCTANT HISTORIANS

by

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The Reluctant Historians – Canada’s History of Documenting our war efforts.

Canada’s rich history of war efforts has been documented through the ages, revealing the evolution of its role on a global stage. From the sacrifices of the Canadian corps when we rallied to the call from Britain, the resilience displayed during Vimy Ridge marked a turning point, earning Canada a newfound respect. Declaration of war against Germany only one day after Great Britain, the difference being, by an act of Our parliament, we earned the respect of our allies during WWII. The United Nations sanctioned Korean conflict, followed shortly after as Canada’s journey is both compelling and complex. Despite this significant contribution to international operations, Canada’s historical documentation has lagged that of its allies. This essay delves into the narrative of Canada’s war history, emphasizing the challenges and delays in documenting these experiences, with a special focus on the protracted Afghanistan war from 2001 to 2014.

Canada’s entry into the annals of war history was marked by a pivotal moment during World War I, particularly in the battle of Vimy Ridge. Prior to this, like its Commonwealth counterparts, Canada was perceived as mere cannon fodder. The Battle of Vimy Ridge is the mythologized symbol of the birth of Canadian national pride and awareness with the melding of the 4 divisions under a Canadian commander Lieutenant-General Arthur Currie. However, Post World War I, the Mackenzie King government asserted Canada’s autonomy, refusing to be mere pawns for the sustenance of Great Britain’s global dominance. This assertion led to Canada’s inclusion as founding member in the League of Nations, showcasing its emergence as a sovereign force in global affairs. World War II saw Canada swiftly aligning with Britain’s declaration of war on Germany. Despite the initial cautiousness, Canada emerged as a nation punching above its weight, earning admiration from allies. However, our reluctance to document our history resulted in our allies claiming victory and expounding their accomplishments. They are not going to push Canada’s efforts for us, in fact, we are on the receiving end of blame for many of their losses. Case in point Dunkirk.

The reluctance to document and celebrate Canada’s war efforts persisted, as evident in the delayed publications of official histories. The official History of World War I wasn’t published until 1938, nearly two decades after the war, and World War II’s account followed suit in 1955. This delay allowed narratives of our allies to dominate, overshadowing Canada’s contributions. Even the history of the Korean war suffered from brevity, limiting its impact on public awareness. The official history of our campaign in Korea carries the self depreciating title “Canada’s Army in Korea. The United Nations Operation 1950-1953 and their Aftermath - A short official account by the Historical Section, General Staff Army Headquarters. Why bother at all.

My focus now shifts to Afghanistan, Canada’s longest war from 2001-2014. The commissioned history in 2007 during the ongoing conflict was a step in the right direction. However, bureaucratic hurdles delayed its release, exemplifying the challenges in documenting contemporary military endeavors. The

three-volume publication titled “Canada’s Army in Afghanistan” faced additional delays due to differences of opinion and bruised egos within the government and DND personnel. Despite the war ending in 2014, the official history was not released until more than a decade later. This prolonged delay underscored the struggle to reconcile differing perspectives and political sensitivities surrounding the Afghan mission. The limited copies of the publication further restricted access to comprehensive understanding of Canada’s role in Afghanistan, leaving the general population and, most importantly, veterans without a detailed account of their perspectives.

Canada’s history of reluctant historians does a dis-service to the Canadian public as well as the members of the organizations who were boots on the ground during the conflict, our military, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, diplomats, civil development contractors, and human rights specialists to mention a few. While the narrative of our allies often overshadows our achievements, the importance of recognizing and preserving our history cannot be overstated. The case of Afghanistan, the country’s longest and most costly war, exemplifies the ongoing struggle to reconcile differing perspectives and release comprehensive accounts in a timely manner. As Canada navigates its role in contemporary conflicts, a commitment to prompt and transparent documentation becomes imperative to honour the sacrifices of those who served and to shape an authentic narrative for future generations.

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Canada now has its own history of the Afghan war — good luck finding a copy | CBC News

By Murray Brewster