

**Military Education and the British Empire,  
1815–1949**

*Edited by Douglas E. Delaney,  
Robert C. Engen, and Meghan Fitzpatrick*



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**Military Education and the British Empire,  
1815–1949**

# Introduction

*Douglas E. Delaney and Robert C. Engen*

IN THE SIX YEARS leading up to the First World War, the British general staff struggled with how to organize the British Empire's myriad military forces for wartime cooperation. The growing threat of German aggression in continental Europe had forced them to think about the possibility of dispatching an expeditionary force to France or Belgium, and, despite the 1907 entente with Russia, the potential requirement to reinforce the Army in India had never really gone away. The armies of the empire<sup>1</sup> simply had to get better at working together – as the recent and disappointing experience of the South African War (the Second Anglo-Boer War) had clearly demonstrated – because there was the very real possibility that they might have to assemble again for some new imperial war effort. In advance of the 1909 imperial conference on naval and military defence, the chief of the imperial general staff (CIGS), Sir William Nicholson, circulated to all the dominions and India a working paper in which he proposed that “all the forces of the Empire ... be organized for war on the same general principles, especially as regards the system of command and staff duties.”<sup>2</sup> He went on to explain that the key to achieving that goal was “uniformity in the system of educating regimental officers, from whom selections for the staff colleges are made. This is to be secured by recognizing the Staff College at Camberley as the central school of military education for the Empire, and by filling at the outset, to such extent as may be approved by the respective governments of the overseas Dominions, the most important instructional appointments for Camberley graduates.” Nicholson returned to the matter in July 1909:

It will be noted that education is the keynote, not only the higher education at a Staff College which is essential if the Imperial General Staff is to be composed of a body of officers trained to *think alike* on all matters of principle, but the preliminary education, by which officers can be so grounded and prepared as to be able to profit from Staff College training. The necessity for preparatory and higher education is so apparent that its importance need not be further insisted upon.<sup>3</sup>

Common military education was the lifeblood of the armies, navies, and air forces of the British Empire. It permeated every aspect of the profession of arms, nourished nascent forces in the dominions, circulated common concepts for solving complex military problems, and conveyed a common language for communicating solutions to those problems in a way that could be understood by all the disparate forces of the empire. It was an essential ingredient for success in both war and peace. Common military education made it easier for the forces of different nations to work together, a point often missed by historians. Too often, our historical thinking has been trapped within national silos, isolated by the limited perspective of one nation's experience when in fact armed forces have often been shaped by external factors and influences. This was particularly the case with the national armies, navies, and air forces of the British Empire, in which common military education was a means of ensuring "coalition" compatibility.

Military education is not a simple subject that can be explained in strictly national or even military terms. It has been well established that the military culture of an armed force is profoundly influenced by the culture of the nation to which the force belongs.<sup>4</sup> National objectives, cultural peculiarities, and priorities undoubtedly influence institutions of military education. Indeed, the temptation is to explain the establishment of military education programs, such as those offered at dominion military colleges like Kingston, Duntroon, and Bloemfontein, as primarily products of their own national circumstances. It is easy to miss the important point that all three dominion military colleges were also designed to cast officers in the imperial mould, and that all drew heavily on the British and Indian armies for instructors. True, their purpose was to produce officers for national forces; it is equally true, however, that the colleges were established to produce officers capable of operating within imperial coalitions. To tell the story of a military school or college of the British Empire in exclusively national terms, therefore, is to tell an incomplete story. Military education was part and parcel of conscious efforts to standardize military forces so that they could work together in war. The armies, navies, and air forces of the British Empire were more alike than unlike, in large measure due to the common military education of their leaders.

This volume is the product of the 2015 Royal Military College of Canada (RMC) History Symposium on military education and empire, during which scholars from across the British Commonwealth gathered to discuss the role of military education in the successes and failures of the empire, from the end of the Napoleonic Wars to the early Cold War. The symposium afforded the opportunity for a transnational examination of military education, which is normally restricted to the closed contexts of national narratives. The chapters

do not represent an exhaustive and definitive study of military education as it was pursued in the armed forces of the British Empire over a period of some 130 years or so. Rather, the essays contained herein are a collection of temporally and geographically diverse topics that reflect what political and military authorities wanted military education programs to do and how they went about trying to achieve those goals.

To date, no book-length study has been done on the role of higher military education and the interconnections of imperial armed forces. A number of excellent volumes detail the rise and development of military education, but these are almost invariably constrained within the parameters of national histories. Some of the best works trace the histories of the educational institutions themselves. Brian Bond's *The Victorian Army and the Staff College, 1854–1914* (1972) explains the development of military professionalism and educational apparatuses in Great Britain before the First World War, firmly situating the rise of staff education within its Victorian historical context, but it does not explore military education developments in India, or even the dominions.<sup>5</sup> John Gooch's *The Plans of War: The General Staff and British Military Strategy, c. 1900–1916* (1974) is a highly focused study on the creation of the British general staff that includes several chapters on the imperial context, but it does not go into depth on the development of the professional military education that underwrote the general staff, and it discusses only a sixteen-year timeframe.<sup>6</sup> Donald Schurman's *The Education of a Navy: The Development of British Naval Strategic Thought, 1867–1914* (1965), one of the classics in the field, ties the personalities and backgrounds of naval thinkers to educational policies and the transformation of their ideas into policy within the Royal Navy.<sup>7</sup> More recently, H.W. Dickinson has delved into the specifics of officer education and training in the Royal Navy in his book-length study, *Educating the Royal Navy: Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Education for Officers* (2007).<sup>8</sup> *Military Education: Past, Present and Future* (2002), an edited volume by Keith Neilson and Greg Kennedy, looks at military education in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but the scope is global, not imperial.<sup>9</sup> F.W. Perry's *The Commonwealth Armies: Manpower and Organization in Two World Wars* (1988) is a rare comparative study of manpower policies in the dominions as well as Britain and India during the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>10</sup> In terms of imperial scope, it comes closer to our work than probably any other cross-national study, but Perry's focus is not education.

Several fine histories of the individual dominions explore military education. It figures prominently in Stephen Harris's seminal work, *Canadian Brass: The Making of a Professional Army, 1860–1969* (1988), and Richard Preston's well-known *Canada's RMC: A History of the Royal Military College* (1969) remains

one of the best descriptive studies of higher learning in the Canadian military.<sup>11</sup> Annette Seegers's *The Military in the Making of Modern South Africa* (1996) investigates civil-military relations in the union and apartheid regimes, stressing professional education as a force that shaped the South African state.<sup>12</sup> Ian McGibbon's *The Path to Gallipoli* (1991) performs a similar role for New Zealand in the pre-1914 era.<sup>13</sup> Air force educational histories are fewer in number. Allan English's *The Cream of the Crop: Canadian Aircrew, 1939-1945* (1996) remains the most prominent contribution in the Canadian historiography, tying education and training policies to manpower issues, leadership, and psychological casualties.<sup>14</sup>

This volume examines three themes of military education in the British Empire: military education as a generator of institutional knowledge and thinking to improve effectiveness; military education as a socializing agent; and military education as an enhancer of interoperability. Claire Cookson-Hills explores the first of these themes with her examination of the military education roots of the Royal Engineers in the nineteenth century (Chapter 1). Without a common body of professional knowledge and well-understood methods for solving engineering problems, Royal Engineers officers would have been reinventing proverbial wheels each time they encountered a new military engineering problem in a new location. Randall Wakelam, Joseph Moretz, and Mark Frost, respectively, examine similar efforts on the part of the Royal Air Force (RAF), the Royal Navy, and the British Army in the twentieth century. Wakelam looks at how the air forces of the empire trained and educated their officers between 1919 and 1949 (Chapter 6). Moretz examines how the Admiralty tried to strike a balance between experiential learning and education during the interwar period (Chapter 7). And Frost explores the curricula of the staff colleges at Camberley and Quetta during the interwar period to challenge the assertion that British Army officers of the Second World War were unprofessional (Chapter 8). Andrew Lambert studies the efforts of Sir Julian Corbett to use history as a means of imparting better strategic faculties to the Royal Navy's senior leadership in order to restore the Admiralty to a place of primacy in the crafting of British grand strategy (Chapter 3). In India, efforts to improve military capabilities often demanded education programs that simply taught languages so that officers and soldiers could communicate, as Alan Jeffreys reveals in his study of Indian Army education between 1920 and 1946 (Chapter 9).

Military education, particularly at the front end of officers' careers, was fundamental to forging identity. Jane Errington scrutinizes how authorities at RMC Kingston attempted to make cadets into officers, gentlemen, and "imperial citizens" during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Chapter 2). Ian van der Waag examines similar themes of socialization and nation building

in South Africa as political and military authorities in the union attempted to use military education as a means of melding the competing loyalties of Britons and Afrikaners into a new South African identity (Chapter 5). Military education was also a tool for inculcating in officers a service identity and culture. Wakelam also explores this dimension of military education programs in his chapter on the RAF, the Royal Canadian Air Force, and the Royal Australian Air Force. Howard Coombs looks at the identity-shaping process in reverse (Chapter 11); he asks how an emerging Canadian nationalism came to be reflected in the curricula for Canada's staff courses during and after the Second World War.

The theme of imperial interoperability figures prominently in several chapters. Andrew Stewart probes how the Imperial Defence College was established for the "training of a body of officers and civilian officials in the broadest aspects of imperial strategy" (Chapter 10). That "body of officers" included students from Britain, India, and the dominions, who discussed and debated matters of imperial defence and forged relationships that would be useful in wartime. In Chapter 8, Frost similarly explores personal relationships and social networks that were formed between officers who attended Camberley and Quetta during the interwar years. John Connor, in tracing Australian military education enterprises between federation in 1901 and the end of the First World War, examines the extent to which commonwealth's military authorities relied on imperial instructors and guidance to maintain compatibility with the other armies of the empire (Chapter 4). The theme of imperial interoperability is also a feature of van der Waag's chapter on military education in South Africa.

Whatever the successes or failures of military education in the armed forces of the British Empire during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, political and military authorities intended that common learning would improve their armed forces, enhance and preserve imperial interoperability, and socialize their officer corps in some way. We hope that the following chapters will shed some light on how they went about trying to achieve those goals.

### Notes

- 1 The term "empire" will be used when referring to the British Empire and the British Commonwealth, so as to avoid confusion with the Commonwealth of Australia.
- 2 W.G. Nicholson, "The Imperial General Staff" in Cd. 4475, *Correspondence Relating to the Formation of an Imperial General Staff* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1908), 12–13.
- 3 General Staff, Proposals for so Organizing the Military Forces of the Empire as to Ensure their Effective Co-operation in the Event of War, 17 July 1909, WO 106/43, The National Archives, Kew (TNA) (emphasis in original).

- 4 See, for example, Allan D. English, *Understanding Military Culture: A Canadian Perspective* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004), 41–44.
- 5 Brian Bond, *The Victorian Army and the Staff College, 1854–1914* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1972).
- 6 John Gooch, *The Plans of War: The General Staff and British Military Strategy, c. 1900–1916* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1974).
- 7 Donald M. Schurman, *The Education of a Navy: The Development of British Naval Strategic Thought, 1867–1914* (London: Krieger, 1984; c. 1965).
- 8 H.W. Dickinson, *Educating the Royal Navy: Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Education for Officers* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007).
- 9 Greg Kennedy and Keith Neilson, eds., *Military Education: Past, Present, and Future* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002).
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- 11 Stephen J. Harris, *Canadian Brass: The Making of a Professional Army, 1860–1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988); and Richard Preston, *Canada's RMC: A History of the Royal Military College* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969).
- 12 Annette Seegers, *The Military in the Making of Modern South Africa* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1996).
- 13 Ian McGibbon, *The Path to Gallipoli: Defending New Zealand, 1840–1915* (Wellington: GP Books, 1991).
- 14 Allan English, *The Cream of the Crop: Canadian Aircrew, 1939–1945* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996).

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