

For Home and Empire

**Voluntary Mobilization in Australia, Canada,
and New Zealand during the First World War**

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UBC Press · Vancouver · Toronto

Contents

List of Illustrations / vi

Acknowledgments / vii

Introduction / 3

- 1 Dominion over War: Local Volunteers, Dominion Mobilization, and the Imperial War Effort / 15
- 2 Hands across the Sea: Greater Britain, New France, and the Ties to Home and Homeland / 36
- 3 Far from Home: Race and the Boundaries of Communal Mobilization / 60
- 4 Aliens or Allies: Southern and Eastern European Immigrants and the Bonds of Military Service / 80
- 5 As Obsolete as the Buffalo and the Tomahawk: Assimilation, Autonomy, and the Mobilization of Indigenous Communities / 105

Conclusion / 139

Notes / 151

Bibliography / 179

Index / 192

Introduction

In April 1915, expeditionary forces from Australia, Canada, and New Zealand experienced their baptisms of fire. At dusk on 22 April, units of the Canadian Expeditionary Force led a counterattack near Ypres, Belgium, to fill the gap left by French colonial troops who had withdrawn in the face of the first major poison-gas attack in history. On the morning of 25 April, soldiers of the Australian Imperial Force and the New Zealand Expeditionary Force rowed ashore to begin an eight-month campaign to control the Gallipoli peninsula. These soldiers' exploits were lionized in the popular press and later formed the foundation for national narratives in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. Popular commemorations of the First World War in Britain's settler colonies – henceforth referred to as Dominions – focus on places such as Anzac Cove, Be'er Sheva, Bullecourt, Messines, Passchendaele, Villers-Bretonneux, or Vimy Ridge to celebrate their battles as parables of national maturation. But only a small fraction of Dominion society fought in these faraway places. The vast majority of people in the Dominions made their mark on the war effort at home through voluntary contributions of work or money.¹

Voluntary contributions provided much of the material that made the Dominions' military victories possible. The Dominion armies' success on the battlefields built on great feats of mobilization that allowed the Dominions to field such formidable military forces on the other side of the world. These fledgling states did not possess the infrastructure, the funds, or the population necessary to maintain a large peacetime professional army. The size and scale of the Dominions' military commitments over the course of the First World War necessitated a drastic expansion of war-fighting capacity. Voluntary action fuelled this expansion. Public subscription campaigns financed all twenty-three airplanes of the 1st Squadron, Australian Flying Corps, while the Hawke's Bay branch of the British Medical Association raised funds to purchase ten of the fourteen motor ambulances needed to equip the field ambulance units of



Women in Toronto collecting sewn and knitted items for the Red Cross, ca. 1915. City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 1244, Item 879.

the New Zealand Expeditionary Force.² The Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire, Canada's largest women's voluntary society, collected funds to equip 36 hospital wards and provided 19 motor ambulances, 22 sterilizing units, and 942 hospital cots.³ Besides raising funds, volunteers knit or sewed necessities such as socks and bandages. Over the course of the war, the Red Cross of New Brunswick collected over 150,000 pairs of socks and donated 119,000 hospital garments, 129,000 linens, and tens of thousands of dressings and bandages.⁴

For many in the Dominions, the war overseas remained a local matter. Scholars such as Ken Inglis, Jock Phillips, and Jonathan Vance have each explored how local markers and memorials transformed public places throughout the Dominions and shaped the broader collective memory of the war. While these studies focus on communal commemorations of the dead, the contributions of the living also joined the landscape of memory through donor lists and rolls of honour that showed how communities at home contributed to the Empire's war. Ambulances purchased through popular subscription bore inscriptions such as "Saskatchewan Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire Ambulance," "Donated by the People of Marlborough, N.Z.," and "Presented by the St Kilda Patriotic Committee and Victorian Artists Society, Melbourne."⁵ Donors even hoped that their contributions would be returned to them as a permanent



A member of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps washes the side of a New Zealand Expeditionary Force ambulance, 1918. Beneath the red cross reads the inscription "Donated by the People of Marlborough, N.Z." Alexander Turnbull Library, 1/2-014147-G.

marker of their wartime patriotism. The Red Cross of Springsure, Queensland, donated an ambulance to the Australian Imperial Force and requested that "any part of it that is left [be] sent back to be placed in the yard of the Shire Hall."⁶ A Lewis gun donated to the Canadian Expeditionary Force was marked with "Gun to be returned to Sandon if in existence at termination of war."⁷ These places provided a rallying point for communities to organize their contributions to the war overseas.

Coordination was the key to wartime mobilization. Individuals could decide for themselves whether to donate some spare change or knit a pair of socks to contribute to the war effort, and a historian could spend a lifetime grappling with the countless individual reasons that motivated countless individual contributions. The desire to produce a larger communal contribution to the war effort provided an important incentive to participate in wartime mobilization. Individual donors offered small amounts of money or labour in the hope that, by joining in a collective effort, these small gifts would make a more important

contribution. *For Home and Empire* looks past the myriad experiences of individual contributors to examine the motives and actions of those who coordinated or collected voluntary work. The line between coordinator and contributor was often blurred, as many did both, but those who coordinated exercised a power that individual donors could not. Donations of coins or knitted comforts needed to be pooled together to purchase a motor ambulance or to fill a care package, and the coordinators of voluntary work determined how individual gifts would produce these more substantial contributions.

How these voluntary grassroots initiatives organized and represented themselves reflected how the members of the community understood their relationship to one another, to their Dominion, and to the Empire. Should the Mayor's Patriotic Fund in Hobart, the capital of Tasmania, provide a separation allowance to a soldier's wife after she moved in with relatives who lived closer to Launceston? Should Welsh women in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, purchase comforts for local soldiers or send their funds to help Welsh soldiers in the British Army? Should Māori volunteers in New Zealand enlist with their local regiment or with a separate battalion? In all these cases, the organizers of the voluntary war effort determined who they would mobilize with and who they would mobilize for, marking the geographical and social boundaries that defined their community. The voluntary war effort relied on collaboration and cooperation, but the proliferation of patriotic initiatives often produced deep rivalries and tense conflicts. Voluntary mobilization in the Dominions remained selective, exclusive, and competitive – ultimately diluting the Dominions' overall contribution to the imperial war effort.

In making substantial and voluntary contributions, donors reserved the right to determine how these gifts ought to be allocated. In January 1916, Daniel Chisholm, a commissioner of the City of Toronto, wrote to the Canadian Army Post Office to inquire about the distribution of fourteen thousand packages of cookies that the city had sent as a Christmas gift for the soldiers of Toronto. Chisholm initiated his inquiry when the mayor received a letter of thanks from a soldier in the British Army, which raised suspicion that the Canadian Army Post Office had not delivered the cookies to their intended recipients.⁸ Crawford Vaughan, premier of South Australia, inquired about a donation of sheep meant to feed soldiers from his state. The Department of Defence had slaughtered and sold the carcasses, intending to use the profits to purchase comforts for South Australian soldiers. Having lost track of the funds, Vaughan demanded an explanation from the Defence Department because “the donors should be consulted as to the disposal of the amount realized” from the sale of their sheep.⁹

The voluntary system afforded donors a degree of sovereignty over their donations; consequently, it provides clues into the motives that drove contributions. Communal bonds played an important role in sustaining popular enthusiasm for Dominion war efforts. As volunteers sent the sum of their collective efforts across the seas, they attached their community's name to gifts ranging from a pair of socks to an airplane and ensured that these gifts reached members of their own community. Amidst the unrelenting call for donations, accounting for these contributions created an "economy of sacrifice," in which all could be seen to share willingly in the collective burden of the war effort.¹⁰ Knowing that their town's name would be prominently displayed on their gift of an ambulance or airplane, or that the soldiers of their local regiment could boast about receiving regular parcels of food or comforts from their friends and neighbours, motivated members of a community to participate in patriotic work to show that their small corner of the British Empire had done its bit during the war.

Inscriptions reflected how communities on the Dominion home fronts distinguished their own contributions to the national and imperial war efforts. The military uniformity of mass mobilization could turn the war effort into a homogenizing process, but self-guided patriotic work provided an opportunity to produce an exceptional contribution that affirmed a community's uniqueness within the nation and empire. Local initiatives generated enthusiasm for their patriotic efforts by celebrating their collective contributions, but this parochial approach often proved wasteful and inefficient when viewed from the perspective of national or imperial mobilization. The need to account for fourteen thousand packages of cookies, or so many heads of sheep, only complicated the task of keeping the Dominion expeditionary forces supplied. The sum of these disparate communal contributions may have reflected a larger willingness in Dominion society to contribute to the war effort, but the model of voluntary mobilization reinforced the geographical and social boundaries that shaped society in the Dominions.

Wartime voluntary action built on a template that had been established during the long history of philanthropy in Britain and the Dominions. Philanthropic and benevolent societies had extended the "civilizing" missions of social uplift and moral reform to the Dominions' Indigenous peoples, the working poor, and newly arrived immigrants. Philanthropic work empowered women of the upper and middle classes, who turned to charitable work as an extension of prescribed feminine ideals, but their mission to uplift reinforced contemporary class hierarchies: those with wealth and status distributed aid and wielded the influence to determine what should be done for the public good. In addition to the colonial

relationship between British settlers and Indigenous people, the language of philanthropy revealed how class hierarchies often intertwined with constructions of race. Historian Anne O'Brien has pointed out that the children of Australia's urban poor were referred to as "street Arabs" while prostitutes were cast as a threat to racial hygiene.¹¹

Upon the outbreak of war in 1914, those who led philanthropic work in the Dominions readily lent their experience and resources to support the war effort. Some voluntary societies, such as the Young Men's Christian Association, extended their peacetime mission of ministering to young men to the training camps of the Dominion armies. More commonly, the executives of voluntary societies took the lead to form new patriotic societies more suited to wartime work. Agnes Dennis, president of the Local Council of Women of Halifax, called a meeting of local women on 5 August to form the Nova Scotia Red Cross and was elected its first president.¹² The existing network of voluntary and philanthropic societies provided a ready infrastructure of experienced executives to lead the voluntary mobilization of Dominion war efforts. The social boundaries that shaped philanthropic work in peacetime carried over to the work of wartime mobilization.

The examination of wartime mobilization through voluntary action contributes to a growing field of scholarship that extends military history into the wider study of war and society. This historiographical shift, which began some thirty years ago, has turned the focus of war history away from the battlefield to how society shapes warfare and, in turn, how warfare shapes society. Adrian Gregory has demonstrated how class divisions persisted in the regiments of the British Army before the enactment of conscription, while Suzan Grayzel's study of women in Britain and France shows how representations of women and their wartime work in the press and propaganda reinforced traditional gender norms, particularly regarding motherhood, despite the unprecedented entry of women into male-dominated spheres of work.¹³ Santanu Das and Timothy Winegard have examined how constructions of race shaped recruiting policies and the lived experience of colonial soldiers in the British forces.¹⁴ Voluntary mobilization favoured those with more disposable time and income, and patriotic work was highly gendered as men enlisted and women volunteered on the home front. These divisions of class and gender exacerbated social divisions of race and indigeneity for communities whose contributions remained invisible and for men who were barred from military service. In this book, I take a comprehensive approach to reveal how the voluntary war effort upheld constructions of class, gender, race, and indigeneity as mutually reinforcing categories that preserved colonial structures in Dominion society.

The historiographical shift towards examining the relationship between war and society also initiated an explosion of local histories of the war, as historians undertook case studies to examine the wartime experiences of those who did not partake in the fighting. This book builds on these localized histories of the war by connecting the experiences of individual communities to the wider study of nations and empires. The centenary of the First World War has rekindled public interest, particularly for local perspectives, in this international conflict. Rich and vivid histories have emerged that examine the events of the First World War through the lens of the hometown, demonstrating how communities such as Regina, Winnipeg, Toronto, Christchurch, Dunedin, or Camden experienced the conflict. Larger studies have examined the impact of the war on Australian states such as Western Australia or Tasmania, New Zealand provincial districts such as Otago or Taranaki, or Canadian provinces such as New Brunswick or Alberta. Collectively, these studies examine conflicts between opposing political ideologies – particularly over the matter of conscription – and the war’s impact on race, class, and gender tensions, which materialized as communities grappled with the costs and sacrifices of war.¹⁵ These comprehensive hometown histories draw on a wide breadth of sources and an exhaustive amount of research to measure the impact of war on the daily life of ordinary people. But this scale of effort often limits these historians’ scope of inquiry to a specific geographical area. While these studies illuminate how the unique context of a town or region shaped the war experience within those geographic boundaries, questions remain: How do these experiences relate to one another? What do local experiences reveal about the broader experience of war in the Dominions? How does the experience of the Dominions relate to other contexts?

To answer these questions, this book situates wartime mobilization within the Dominions’ shared history as settler colonies of Britain. A vast literature examines how the process of British colonialism shaped the historical trajectory of the Dominions. Part of this history highlights the Dominions’ constitutional transition to nationhood, but another layer examines the process by which settler societies seized the structures of colonialism to assert control over these new states. Most Australians, Canadians, and New Zealanders understand that their national histories include the attempted eradication of Indigenous peoples through warfare, starvation, or assimilation, as well as race riots and policies of segregation or exclusion that targeted immigrants who laboured to build the Dominions’ industries or infrastructure. Patrick Wolfe’s oft-quoted essay outlining the defining characteristics of settler colonialism, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” argues that this form of colonization

“is a structure, not an event,” and many indeed acknowledge that the colonial past perpetuates structural inequalities in contemporary Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. The disproportionately high incarceration rate among Indigenous peoples and the detainment or exclusion of refugees in these three nations provide just two examples of contemporary practices that originate in the deeper patterns of colonization.¹⁶ Yet the legacy of settler colonialism extends beyond these prominent and violent examples. Countless subtle – but no less malignant – examples of settler colonial practices shaped – and continue to shape – the fabric of society in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. This book highlights the influence of settler colonial practices on the seemingly unrelated process of wartime mobilization.

Nationalist narratives of the Dominions often celebrate the First World War as a step towards cultural and constitutional autonomy from Britain. This autonomy from the Empire, however, worked in concert with settlers’ assertion of sovereignty over the territory of the Dominions. British settler societies worked to consolidate their hold on land acquired through the displacement of Indigenous peoples – forced from their territory through acts of violence ranging from open warfare to calculated campaigns of starvation. Historians Caroline Elkins and Susan Pedersen outline how settlers achieve sovereignty over territory through a system of social domination that naturalizes their permanent presence on Indigenous lands. The settlers’ desire for territorial sovereignty, however, conflicts with imperial rule. British settlers in the Dominions pursued and asserted sovereignty over their territory while demanding sovereignty from Britain. The redefinition of imperial bonds as a result of wartime sacrifices remains a prominent theme in Dominion narratives of the First World War, but this autonomy from Britain should also be examined alongside the Dominions’ assertion of sovereignty over their own territory.¹⁷

More than the acquisition of territory, settler societies moulded the landscape of the Dominions in the image of Britain. Train stations, churches, and universities were built with Gothic embellishments such as arched windows, buttresses, or pointed spires to give new buildings the imposing patina of Old English traditions. Public parks and stately homes turned rough wilderness into pristine English gardens. These transplants bore the promise of creating a new and better version of the original. Historian James Belich explains how the promise of bountiful territory sustained designs for a Neo-Europe, or “Better Britain,” in the Dominions, where British settlers could overcome the disparities between tenants and landed gentry or the pestilence of overcrowded industrial cities to produce a more egalitarian society.¹⁸

Aspirations to cultivate a new society went hand in hand with obsessions about social and racial purity. British settlers populated and exploited vacated

lands for industry and agriculture, but the extraction of natural resources and the construction of infrastructure to sustain economic growth necessitated the importation of a labour force willing to work for relatively low wages. Immigrants from Asia, South Asia, the Caribbean, and the European periphery met these demands, but historians Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds have demonstrated how British settlers' obsession with the perceived threat of migrant labourers resonated through public discourse and legislation in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and other comparable contexts. For many British settlers, unrestricted immigration presented a threat to the moral and racial hygiene of settler colonies. British settlers raised social and legal boundaries that pushed peoples of colour to the margins and preserved the image of each Dominion as a new British homeland.¹⁹

Lawmakers ensured the dominance of British settlers in the Dominions. Legislation reinforced social disparities by creating separate legal categories to segregate and disenfranchise Indigenous peoples, as well as immigrants from British colonies in Asia, South Asia, and the Caribbean. Scholars such as Afua Cooper and Ranginui Walker have revealed long histories of resistance, protest, and activism against this segregation, but the outbreak of war and the prospect of sharing sacrifice in the imperial war effort offered a new opportunity to overcome the barriers that divided communities in the Dominions. As volunteers came together in support of the war effort, committees orchestrated efforts to show that their town or city could be more productive, more patriotic, more loyal, and more British – often by omitting, excluding, or trivializing contributions from communities of colour.²⁰

The decision to withhold voluntary contributions based on race or ethnicity contrasted starkly with wartime mobilization in Europe. The mass politics of the late nineteenth century had solidified the concept of the nation in places such as France and Germany, where the threat of war temporarily reconciled social and political divisions. The outbreak of war in August 1914 produced the *Union sacrée* and the *Augusterlebnis*, as political parties set their partisan divisions aside and united for the sake of the national war effort. In the first years of the war, European authorities relied on the cooperation of civilian institutions, which actively supported the state's coordination of the war effort. John Horne and other historians argue, however, that nationalism alone could not sustain popular enthusiasm for the war, nor could the war effort be carried solely by popular enthusiasm. When voluntary contributions lagged, or proved inefficient, the wartime state exercised greater control over the means to wage war, to devote even more resources to the national war effort. The phrase “home front” emerged in 1917 to underscore the importance of civilian mobilization in support of military operations, whereas the postwar memoirs of Ernst Jünger

and Erich Ludendorff conjured the terms “total mobilization” and “total war” to describe the centralization of Germany’s resources under the wartime state. Only enemy aliens or other suspected subversives were kept from participating in the war effort. The state’s centralizing control over the national war effort reflected the “totalizing logic” of wartime mobilization, which worked to press every available human and material resource to the defence of the nation.²¹

The Dominions’ reliance on voluntary mobilization defied the totalizing logic exercised by European states. The escalating human and material cost of the war necessitated efficiency of effort, but state authorities in the Dominions remained reluctant to impose tighter controls on voluntary contributions. Historian Peter Grant has outlined the gradual centralization of the British voluntary effort under the authority of the director general of voluntary organization and the National Council of Social Services, while Deborah Cohen’s study of veteran rehabilitation in Britain and Germany points out that the German *Bundesrat* went so far as to outlaw the formation of new charitable societies to prevent them from competing with state agencies for increasingly scarce resources.²² Dominion governments enacted federal agencies to coordinate the collection of repatriation funds, such as the New Zealand Federation of Patriotic Societies or the Canadian Patriotic Fund, but, unlike their European counterparts, neither possessed the authority necessary to centralize local collections into a cohesive national effort. As European states took greater control over their national war efforts, the Dominions’ reliance on voluntary mobilization left it to donors to determine why and how they would contribute to the war effort.

The mobilization of the Dominions also contrasted with British imperial policies. Imperial authorities in the Caribbean, Africa, South Asia, and Asia recruited colonial subjects to serve in imperial forces both in Europe and in peripheral theatres, yet military authorities in the Dominions relented from allowing the enlistment of Black or Asian volunteers in their expeditionary forces. Accepting contributions from these diasporic communities would have added to the Dominions’ overall contribution to the imperial war effort. Promoting the diversity of the Dominions’ war efforts would have played into imperial propagandists’ portrayal of Britain as an enfranchised, enlightened, pluralistic empire battling against the autocratic, despotic, and militaristic Hun. In retrospect, an inclusive approach to voluntary mobilization would have positively affected Dominion and imperial war efforts, yet the British settlers who coordinated local patriotic work, as well as the state authorities who regulated the war effort, hesitated to accept contributions that might erode the racial hierarchies of settler society. Exclusion from the war effort created monopolies in the economy of sacrifice.

Wartime mobilization highlighted the diverging interests of local communities, the Dominion governments, and the Empire. In striking a balance between the needs of the imperial war effort and the impact of voluntary contributions on the structures of Dominion society, communities of British settlers, Indigenous peoples, and immigrants or diasporas negotiated with the volunteers who coordinated local patriotic work and with representatives of the Dominion and imperial states to determine their place in the war effort. Discussions over who could contribute to the voluntary effort, who could attach the name of their town or region to their work, and how one community's contributions should fit with neighbouring efforts reinforced boundaries of gender, class, race, and indigeneity, but these debates remained grounded in the language of place.

This book's content is drawn primarily from the minute books of voluntary societies or government correspondence files that preserve much of the negotiations that shaped the voluntary war effort in the Dominions. A comparative study of wartime mobilization in the Dominions of Australia, Canada, and New Zealand reveals different approaches to a common problem. Local autonomy generally prevailed in New Zealand, while Australian states such as South Australia and Queensland passed more aggressive legislation to collectivize voluntary efforts. Explicit defence regulations in Australia facilitated the practice of racial exclusion in the Australian Imperial Force, while Canadian regulations made all British subjects eligible for military service. Despite such variations, the selective and exclusive nature of the voluntary war effort demonstrated a remarkable continuity between the three Dominions.

The chapters of this book explore the overarching patterns that shaped voluntary mobilization. Chapter 1 examines the organization of local patriotic funds and unsuccessful attempts to centralize them into regional or national collections. Chapters 2 and 3 examine the coordination of patriotic collections and the recruiting efforts of diasporic communities, comparing the mobilization of the British diaspora to the experience of the Asian and Black diaspora. Chapter 4 considers the enlistment of eastern and southern European immigrants as they attempted to join Dominion expeditionary forces and, later, to reinforce Allied armies such as the Serbian Army at Salonika or the Polish Legion in France. Chapter 5 examines the mobilization of Indigenous communities in the Dominions. The structure of these chapters reflects the social and geographical categories that shaped the voluntary war effort. Comparing the experiences of the communities examined in each chapter reveals how the underlying logic of settler colonial society – particularly its preoccupations with local autonomy and racial hierarchies – shaped the Dominions' approach to wartime mobilization.

As Dominion soldiers secured their reputation on the battlefield, communities throughout Australia, Canada, and New Zealand defined their place in the nation and the Empire through voluntary patriotic work. In determining how disparate local contributions fit into the regional, national, and imperial war efforts, donors and volunteers revealed the bonds and boundaries that defined the communities with which they mobilized. Voluntary efforts organized themselves according to the limits of their hometown or the borders of their region, and these place names adorned donated items, such as ambulances, machine guns, and care packages, to represent that community's unique contribution to the war effort. But hometown pride reinforced social boundaries within and between communities. Racist recruiting policies in the Dominion and imperial armed forces present familiar topics for scholars of war and society, but situating these policies in the wider experience of the voluntary war effort reveals that practices of racial exclusion in the Dominions were rooted in ideals of community, localism, and volunteerism – ideals central to the principles of settler colonial autonomy. While popular commemorations often focus on the First World War's transformative impact on the history of the Dominions, this book takes a step back to examine how the mobilization of communities throughout Australia, Canada, and New Zealand reflected the bonds and boundaries that defined settler society in these three Dominions.

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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: For home and empire : voluntary mobilization in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand during the First World War / Steve Marti.

Names: Marti, Steve, author.

Series: Studies in Canadian military history.

Description: Series statement: Studies in Canadian military history | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20190127481 | Canadiana (ebook) 20190131306 | ISBN 9780774861205 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780774861229 (PDF) | ISBN 9780774861236 (EPUB) | ISBN 9780774861243 (Kindle)

Subjects: LCSH: Military service, Voluntary – Australia – History – 20th century. | LCSH: Military service, Voluntary – Canada – History – 20th century. | LCSH: Military service, Voluntary – New Zealand – History – 20th century. | LCSH: World War, 1914–1918 – Australia. | LCSH: World War, 1914–1918 – Canada. | LCSH: World War, 1914–1918 – New Zealand.

Classification: LCC D546 .M37 2019 | DDC 940.3/32—dc23

Canada

UBC Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support for our publishing program of the Government of Canada (through the Canada Book Fund), the Canada Council for the Arts, and the British Columbia Arts Council.

This book has been published with the help of a grant from the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, through the Awards to Scholarly Publications Program, using funds provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Publication of this book has been financially supported by the Canadian War Museum.

Set in Helvetica Condensed and Minion by Artegraphica Design Co. Ltd.

Copy editor: Lesley Erickson

Proofreader: Kristy Lynn Hankewitz

Cartographer: Eric Leinberger

UBC Press

The University of British Columbia

2029 West Mall

Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2

www.ubcpres.ca