

Clio's Warriors

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Clio's Warriors

Canadian Historians and the Writing of the World Wars

Tim Cook



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Sir Winston Churchill described the act of writing a book as similar to that of surviving a long and debilitating illness. As with all illnesses, the afflicted are forced to rely heavily on many to see them through their suffering.

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As I am a ground pounder at heart, and with most of my previous academic writing relating to Canada and the Great War, I turned to two friends and colleagues for insight into Canada's naval history. At the National Archives of Canada, Robert Fisher, a former naval historian at DHH, allowed me to pick his brain on matters of official history and the Royal Canadian Navy. It was also my pleasure to work with Dr. Roger Sarty at the Canadian War Museum (CWM). Despite holding together the CWM new building project for the two years we worked together, he always had time for me and shared freely his love of history as he puffed on his pipe. I peppered him mercilessly on questions of official history, the Second World War, and all manner of salacious gossip. He obliged.

At one stage when writing this book, I thought I would list all of the historians who have influenced my work over the years. That proved impossible, but there is a convivial relationship among most military historians in the country, perhaps due to a perceived siege mentality, brought on by assaults or snide comments from other non-military academics. The sharing of ideas at conferences has remained an important staple for my own development as an historian. The most important annual conference is at Wilfrid Laurier, hosted by Mike Bechthold and Terry Copp, both of whom have done so much for military history in their ongoing editorship

of *Canadian Military History*. The profession would not be the same today without their journal.

At the Canadian War Museum, I have been lucky to work with gifted colleagues and brilliant historians. Since my arrival in early 2002, Dr. Cameron Pulsifer and Dr. Peter MacLeod have been good friends and colleagues; they have read almost everything that I've published, including this book. Their knowledge is imposing and I have profited from their generosity. It should be pointed out that this book was written while I was engaged in the satisfying work of developing the new permanent galleries for the CWM. This was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and the thrill of building this museum for all Canadians was never diminished despite a sometimes crushing workload. My colleagues in the Historical Section at the CWM have provided support and friendship, and while most knew only vaguely that I was working on "something," they were an important emotional crutch throughout this project. I have learned much from Dr. Dean Oliver, Dr. Serge Durlinger, Glenn Ogden, Martin Auger, Patricia Grimshaw, Dr. Cameron Pulsifer, Dr. Peter MacLeod, Dr. Laura Brandon, Dr. Amber Lloydlangsten, Andrew Burtch, and Ryan Touhey. I would also like to thank Catherine Woodcock of the CWM library for tracking down countless inter-library loans.

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As I researched this project, interviewed historians, and presented conference papers, there were many in the profession who claimed it was about time that someone tackled the topic. I benefited from this interest. Most of Canada's leading military historians read through draft chapters of the manuscript and offered keen insight into the writing of the world wars. I profited from the generosity and editorial skills of Dr. J.L. Granatstein, Dr. Desmond Morton, Brereton Greenhous, Dr. Stephen Harris, Dr. Jeffrey Grey, Owen Cooke, Professor Terry Copp, Dr. Roger Sarty, Dr. W.A.B. Douglas, Dr. Marc Milner, Dr. Jonathan Vance, Dr. David Zimmerman, Dr. A.M.J. Hyatt, and Dr. Patrick Brennan. Formal and informal interviews with many of the above, including Dr. David Bercuson, Dr. Serge Bernier, Dr. Geoff Hayes, Dr. Scott Robertston, Dr. Norman Hillmer, and Professor Bob Spencer, improved many sections of the manuscript. While not all the advice proffered was put to use, their suggestions and intellectual prodding strengthened the final work.

My parents instilled in me a love for history. It took a little while for it to catch fire, but it has been burning ever since. While both are accomplished historians in their own right, and I have benefited specifically from my father's patient and expert editing skills over the years, particularly on this book, it is their generosity and love that have had the greatest impact on me. As a father now, too, I better

understand the challenge of balancing a professional career and a young family. My parents did so with a loving generosity that my brother, Graham, and I still find amazing. As with so much in this life, this book is partly dedicated to them.

But none of this would be possible without Sarah. She has been my best friend, my confidante, and fellow traveller on this path. Sarah, too, was completing her own dissertation while working a full-time job. But through all of this, she was there at every stage, sharing my excitement and urging me forward, even with only a wry smile and a hug. This work is dedicated to her and to our daughter, Chloe, who puts this all into perspective and has brought much joy to our lives.

Clio's Warriors

Introduction: Writing the World Wars

Canada is an unmilitary community: Warlike her people have often been forced to be; military they have never been.

– C.P. STACEY

Governments and their officials fear historians.

– KEITH WILSON

Anybody can make history. Only a great man can write it.

– OSCAR WILDE

The two world wars of 1914-18 and 1939-45 weave through Canada's history like threads through a tapestry, stitching together myriad experiences to form our identity and culture. There are few aspects of Canadian society that have not been shaped by these wars, from politics to family, from the role of government to the formation of social policy, from the status of women to French-English relations. The loss of more than 102,000 Canadians in these two conflicts caused incalculable grief. Yet Canada emerged a nation transformed in their aftermath.

Unfortunately, the momentous events of the two world wars are slipping from lived experience, from memory to history, as participants die in increasing numbers. Yet it remains the stories, accounts, and narratives of war historians that act as a testimony to Canada's world war experiences. However, this book is less concerned with Canada's military involvement in the two world wars than with how historians have interpreted those events. An analysis of key historians and their works reveals how historical themes underpinning memory and narrative of the two world wars have been constructed within historical writing. The emphasis is on examining the enduring contributions that formed, fashioned, or challenged the canon of Canadian world war writing and constructed memory. Due to the deep scars of conscription in Quebec, the wars are viewed and taught differently in that province. In fact, Canada's twentieth-century military history is largely ignored there, and almost all the academic world war studies are by English-speaking historians.

It has been the official historians of the Department of National Defence who, for much of the twentieth century, have controlled the academic writing on the two world wars, and that history usually has been narrowly defined as the history

of military operations. Training, administration, and operational combat have been the focus. Only recently have academic military historians pushed their discipline to explore the impact of the world wars on individuals and society. Nonetheless, the publications of A.F. Duguid, C.P. Stacey, Gilbert Tucker, Fred Hitchins, and more recent official historians provide the central narrative when analyzing the writing on Canada's world wars. While this book is not an institutional history of the Department of National Defence's historical sections, the prominent role of official history in influencing the canon of world war writing requires that significant space be devoted to exploring these historians, their accomplishments, and their historical works.

Official histories can be defined as those authorized by an institution, group, or person, where that same agent agrees to support the project financially. As well, it generally means that full access is often given to otherwise restricted records. However, these unique histories do not automatically equate into hagiography, although that can sometimes be the case. "Official but not history," was Sir Basil Liddell Hart's famous assessment of the British Great War official histories.¹ Liddell Hart's flippant remark was too clever by half, but most academic historians would agree in principle about the flawed nature of official histories. "Beset by PR, puffery, and self-promotion," wrote historian Christopher Moore, "we distrust all official statements and wonder almost instinctively about the real story concealed beneath any authorized version of events."² Official history has the added burden of being closely associated with military history, which, as we shall see, has always had an uneasy relationship with academic history.

In Canada the official histories prompted the study of the two world wars, and for this reason they must be analyzed beyond the simple derision of Liddell Hart's glib statements. As the chroniclers of the nation's wartime sacrifices, the official historians were indeed petitioned and pressured, but they fought against writing "court history" that would simply please their political and military masters. While the official histories have their flaws, they are also exceptionally important foundational studies that deserve considerable attention and analysis in their own right. However, the battles of interpretation that raged behind the final published product – pieced together from the archival records of the historians themselves – forms the core analysis of this book.

The official historians were confronted with the monumental tasks of reading and processing millions of pages of documentation. The results they produced met with varied success in Canada, but their influence always went far beyond that of historian and chronicler. Clio, the muse of history who is often portrayed with her books and documents, had her champions, and the official historians saw their role as guardians of memory and keepers of the past. However, following the two world wars, there were reputations at stake, and the official historians were forced to navigate carefully through the contested issues. Yet they retained

the power to influence how the wars would be portrayed, and their works were, for the most part, important studies based on the war records. Laying an interpretive framework, the official historians forged an historical legacy through their writings and their lesser-known role as archivists for their respective services. During the two world wars, for instance, the official historians sought out the war records, ensured their survival, and in some cases even influenced the drafting of various types of records. Without the official historians, subsequent generations of scholars would be far less able to reappraise the wars.

Official histories were a test of endurance. All of them required years, sometimes decades, to complete. Putting aside the sheer difficulty of the projects, many official historians suffered from writing contemporary history and this, rather than the “official” designation, presented the greatest difficulty. The first generation of official historians was denied the luxury of waiting for time to dull recent events, and they were expected to produce scholarly, contemporary history for soldiers and civilians very soon after the end of each war. Later generations of official historians had time to reflect on these complex events, but they too faced their own wars of reputations: the burden of contributing to the social memory surrounding the sacrifice of millions, and the pressure exerted on them by politicians and the high command, as well as veterans’ organizations, required a nuanced approach. And although censorship rarely came in the form of a red pen, the official historians, both the first and second generation, faced more subtle pressures. “The State needs no heavy-handed censorship,” wrote historian Herbert Butterfield, “for it binds the historian with soft charms and with subtle, comfortable chains.”³ How the official historians fought against overt censorship as well as the more covert constraints and responsibilities of their position are important considerations for assessing their work and their role within the larger historical profession.

The official historians were not anxious to embarrass their governments or war heroes. The cautious writing of the official historians has sometimes been criticized for minimizing the culpability of nations or individuals. Yet writing at the coal face of history can provide an immediacy with unfolding events and at the same time a loss of perspective. The official historians were therefore careful about making sweeping judgments and condemnations, especially since, despite their unique positions, they were aware that they could not see or process all the war records. There were simply too many, and some series were too disorganized or scattered to use or, in other cases, were withheld from the historians for years. Official historians also made careful judgments because they understood the consequences of careless writing: they offered the first official conclusions, and having spent years studying documents, their findings had far more weight than other historical works or private memoirs. If contemporary official historians were tempered in their assessments, it is also true that all official works contained damning conclusions of individuals or the role of military units or operations,

and sometimes these had a lasting impact on the subsequent historiography. While official historians worked within an “official” structure, the barriers were not nearly as confining as some academic historians subsequently suggested or still believe. No history is without bias, and the work of Canada’s official historians must be examined to understand both its defects and its value.

The official historians had a strong effect on the historical profession as they provided the first foundational studies based on official research. Moreover, they did not toil in solitude from their academic counterparts. Official historians like Charles Stacey, George Stanley, and S.F. Wise were leaders in the historical profession, and their command of Canadian history earned them a significant reputation among their academic contemporaries. The Canadian public, too, greeted the official histories as important contributions, with each publication eagerly awaited and extensively reviewed in newspapers. Far from being perceived as publicity exercises by the government of the day or as obscure academic works, the official histories were widely regarded as accurate and authentic accounts based on the official war records.

This unique access to war records also caused some anger and resentment among academics, who could neither utilize the same essential documents nor confirm the findings of the official historians. But as the British naval official historian S.W. Roskill noted, what was the alternative? Should “the archives of all departments be thrown open to all and sundry” as soon as the “guns stopped firing?” Or did historians “prefer that no history should be written until the day comes when the documents are lodged in the Public Records Office?”⁴ The former was clearly impossible for modern nations still recovering from the exertions of war, to say nothing of protecting sensitive negotiations or frank comments about continuing allies or former enemies whom were now considered allies. But to close the archives to all would leave the first draft of history to journalists or memorialists thirty or fifty years hence. Official history written while influential participants are still alive is likely to be flawed, but are historians to abdicate their role to popular writers who are first out of the gate, driven by the desire to present “their” version of history before the records become available? With Canadian governments refusing to open the records for at least several decades after the wars, the task of first assessing these conflicts fell to the official historians. They did not always achieve the nuanced interpretations of later historiography, but they understood well their important role in influencing that historiography.

The official historians also shaped the war archives of the nation. If cautious writing failed to reveal the full extent of certain events, crises, or personality flaws, in most cases evidence remained in the war archives – there to be uncovered by future generations of historians. Had the official military historians been producing parochial histories to prop up corrupt regimes, there can be no doubt that

controversial or revealing records would have been expurgated.⁵ They were not. The official historians also shaped the archival record by setting guidelines for their creation through involvement at military headquarters, authoring their own reports, and collecting records in the field.

While some military historians have undertaken broad panoramic analyses of the Canadian experience, others have offered micro studies of various aspects in order to piece together complex, disparate events of the past. In effect, some are looking at the forest and some at the trees. Very few, however, have examined the roots. These are the records that underpin both the broad and the narrow analyses, and without them the trees and forest, to continue the analogy, cannot grow. Yet the notion of the archives and their creation being somehow neutral must be challenged. This work, therefore, also analyzes how the war records were created, and what pressures and influences were exerted on them before they were ever transferred to form the defence archives of the nation.⁶

The process of inscription (capturing history in records creation) must be considered as important as the process of decoding (the reading of the text and the compilation of research and writing). Archives are not neutral. There is always a reason to create them, and there is always an author inscribing and interpreting events within a power-shaped context. The act of record creation must be deconstructed, the layers of meaning pulled back and analyzed to better understand the process that influenced the war histories. Archival records are more than simply passive sources of study: their creation, form, and content must also be the subject of historical inquiry.

Less important, but having a significant impact on the writing of history, is an analysis of access to the war records of the nation. As memory fades and events move from shared memory to history, those who control the records control the past. In the historical profession, one must have access to records, or there can be no academic history. Journalists and memorialists can write without war records, but that is a far different type of history. And with the archives closed to academics until decades after the wars, it was the official historians who controlled the records and use of them.

Archives remain sites of contested power and interpretation. The official historians guarded them and in some cases lorded over them, allowing access only to a select few. As such, the writing of the world wars by academic historians remained stifled until late in the twentieth century. This new generation of historians, unencumbered by the trials of contemporary history but still forced to deal with decades of interpretation (including much of what the official historians laid down), were able to employ the war archives to reappraise the past. There remains much to be learned from the archives, but there is also much that can be misconstrued. It is the historian's duty to understand events within the context

of the time rather than by reading history backwards with the benefit of hindsight. The latter approach, as we shall see, continues to make Canadian military history highly contested by a number of constituents.

History, in the sense of what occurred in the past, is frozen, inert, and finished. Yet the writing of history is forever engaged: the world wars are constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed by each generation of historians. The interpretation of the past changes with the ever-evolving social and cultural contexts of the present, and new evidence and methodologies also provide additional areas of inquiry. Yet each new generation is shaped by the ongoing historical work of its predecessors. Official histories drive this story, but significant memoirs, journalistic accounts, and academic histories in the last half of the twentieth century complete the canon of world war writing. And while there have been important historiographical essays over the last eight decades, this book will delve deeper into the writing of Canadian military history through an analysis and exploration of surviving discourse.⁷ While correspondence, semi-official memoranda, and even book reviews offer many insights, these sources are not without their pitfalls. Many of these historical disputes are by no means settled; they continue to provoke spirited debate among historians. Monograph analyses or interpretative theories that appear important in 2006 may soon be superseded or discredited. But a principal aim of this book is to assess the historical works in question against the context of their own times.

In short, this is military intellectual history: the history of ideas, individuals, actions, and events that underpin the Canadian documentation and writing of the world wars.⁸ To examine the history behind the official history, particularly the items that were never published, is in many ways more telling than those that made their way into print. And this hidden history helps to reveal the major themes weaving through the official histories, archival records, and military reputations.

Historians distill the past, repackage it to find meaning, and draw relevant lessons. Historians are further forced to compress events, arranging them to make sense, while recognizing that their sources are inherently flawed. Some recent historians, in this case lumped loosely under the very large rubric of postmodernism, have claimed that history is little more than fiction, that everything is relative, and that no historian can possibly attain the objective truth.⁹ Historians have been influenced by postmodernist theory to the betterment of the profession, becoming more critical of their own biases and blind spots. But while historians have long discarded notions of historical writing containing the truth or being written from an objective point of view, most would argue that the past can be reconstructed through a faithful reading of the surviving archival record. Many historians, after intensely studying the archival records in their many forms, know their ability to reveal the acts, deeds, and events in illuminating detail. History based on a rigorous interrogation of those archival records, and a willingness to understand

them within the context of their creation, will allow the past to be rediscovered, recast, and reinterpreted. Historians are not simply writing fiction. Perhaps it is best to turn to one of the great historians and history makers of the twentieth century, Sir Winston Churchill. Speaking of democracy, he said it was the worst form of governance, except for all the others. The same may be said for history. While history is flawed and biased and can never be captured and presented in its entirety, in giving society its vital roots for intellectual growth in the present, it just may be the worst method of inquiry, except for all the others.

There are truths to be uncovered; there are important lessons to be learned; there are sacrifices that need to be remembered. As a profession with a long and rich legacy, it is time for historians to better understand the corpus of records and writings that form the canon of Canadian world war history and the construction of our national memory.

1

Documenting War and Forging Reputations, 1914-18

The First World War remains by all odds the greatest event in Canada's history.

– C.P. STACEY

The world cannot be allowed to forget. Records are necessary to knowledge.

There can be no history without them.

– SIR MAX AITKEN, LORD BEAVERBROOK

The Canadian Corps was one of the finest fighting formations in the Great War, regarded by both allies and enemies as shock troops that were thrown into the bloodiest campaigns to deliver victory. With an almost nonexistent professional army before the war, Canada raised 600,000 men, of whom 424,000 served overseas from 1914 to 1919. As with other national armies fighting on the Western Front, the casualties were appalling; by the armistice, more than 60,000 Canadians were dead, and another 138,000 had been wounded in combat. Despite this bloodletting, or perhaps as a result of it, the Canadians earned a reputation as determined and efficient soldiers.

Both isolated and idealized, Canada was on the frontier of the Empire. With seemingly free land and a country without deep class divisions, Canada must have appeared carved out of a perfect wilderness by a “hardy and industrious people” to those in England’s congested cities.¹ Much of the writing by imperial “mythmakers, enthusiasts and fictionalists” envisioned Canada as a country of hunters and sportsmen, with an unspoiled land that was as rich in adventure and resources as it was as deficient in culture and history.² The attributes of those who had settled this harsh land were strength, vigour, and purity. “We are the Northmen of the New World,” proclaimed R.G. Haliburton, a Canadian novelist, whose words suggested that it was not only the British who were interested in constructing a hardy image for the new nation.³ It is not surprising that many of the Canadian soldiers arriving in England were thought to have emerged recently from the frozen tundra. This was a strong race with all the qualities of which any Social Darwinist could approve. Despite this perceived sense of otherness, more than 70 percent of the First Contingent was British born, although many had been living in Canada for decades. By the end of the war, only a little more than 50 percent of the force was Canadian born.⁴

Despite frequent allusions to the country being populated by a race of sportsmen and hunters, the Canadians were not immediately viewed as an elite force. Drawn from the harsh dominion of the North, Canadians were seen as undisciplined, unruly troops who had proved their unconventional but adept fighting skills during the South African War; however, they were deemed more brawlers than soldiers.⁵ Moreover, the difficult learning curve on the Western Front was cruel to all inexperienced troops, and the Canadians were no exception. They went through several difficult and costly battles in the first two years of the war that left them viewed as suspect by their British commanders. This changed by the end of the Battle of the Somme in 1916. Like their Australian counterparts, who were also seen as an elite force by the end of the war, as the Canadians gained fighting confidence and skills, they began to develop an independent identity. In the process, the Dominion armies demanded recognition from the British who fought next to them. This sense of distinction helped to foster esprit de corps within Canadian units, but the creation of an identity did not happen by chance. The Canadian Corps had an active propaganda campaign that publicized Canadian uniqueness throughout the war.

The organization behind this promotion was the Canadian War Records Office, headed by Sir Max Aitken, later Lord Beaverbrook, an expatriate Canadian millionaire with close ties to military and political leaders in both Canada and the United Kingdom. With characteristic passion, Aitken employed his considerable skills as a press baron, member of parliament, and influential peer to advance a relentless campaign to extol the heroic deeds of Canadians in battle. Journalistic features accentuating Canadian exploits, the commissioning of artists, photographers, and cinematographers to craft Canadian-content works, the creation of commemorative journals, and even the publication of the first popular war histories, all helped to shape a distinctive Canadian identity. Largely at his own discretion, but also supported by Prime Minister Sir Robert Borden, Minister of Militia and Defence Sir Sam Hughes, and the Ministers of Overseas Military Forces, Sir George Perley and Sir A.E. Kemp, Aitken's active campaign, when combined with the very real accomplishments of the Canadian Corps on the battlefield, enshrined the Canadians' reputation within the British Expeditionary Force (BEF). With an eye on the future, Aitken would provide a steady barrage of media products to manufacture a sense of distinctiveness and identity for the Canadian soldier, while at the same time gathering, writing, and preserving a legacy of war records that would be employed by future historians to understand the Great War.

MANY CANADIANS followed the deteriorating situation in Europe in the summer of 1914, and the government turned to a number of experts for advice. One of the most prominent, Sir Max Aitken, advised his acquaintances Robert Borden and

Sam Hughes that it was unlikely that Britain would ever go to war over an issue in the Balkans. Yet as brinkmanship spiralled into war ultimata, Aitken changed his appreciation, supplying the now scrambling Canadian government with inside information gleaned from British social circles, which included friends such as Winston Churchill, Andrew Bonar Law, and Rudyard Kipling. And when Great Britain declared war on 4 August, Canada too, as a dominion in the British Empire, was at war. The Cabinet needed someone to keep it abreast of the ever-changing situation on the Western Front and in the backrooms of London. Notwithstanding a somewhat darkened reputation, Aitken was well suited for the job.

Max Aitken was born in 1879 and raised in New Brunswick. While excelling at neither his studies nor sports, he exhibited a command of business, running several profitable schemes at an early age. He began to acquire small companies in his twenties, sell shares in them, and purchase new companies with the profits. An exuberant and energetic figure, short in stature and with an enormous grin, Aitken revelled in deal making. He earned grand profits while others floundered in his wake. After making millions from buying up, amalgamating, and creating monopolistic conglomerates, and then selling out at the right time, Aitken left Canada for England in 1910 under a cloud of suspicion.⁶ Viewed by some as a market exploiter, perhaps he had simply made too much money too quickly. He had certainly not spread enough of it around to the powerful men who effectively controlled the burgeoning Canadian economy.

Aitken wasted little time in establishing himself in English society. He won a parliamentary seat in 1911, was knighted for his support of the Tory party, and began to buy up newspaper companies shortly thereafter. Nonetheless, Aitken was mistrusted for his dealings in Canada and possibly for his “new money” wealth. Socially active in some of the best London clubs – certainly more so than he was in the House of Commons – he also contributed journalistic pieces to Canadian newspapers. He kept in touch in other ways too, providing support and money to the Canadian Conservative Party, especially Borden and Hughes, to whom he gave campaign money for the 1911 election. When war was declared, Aitken was thus not only seen as the Canadian expert in Britain, but also as a political ally. Yet Sir Max expected to be asked to assist the Herbert Asquith government in prosecuting the war effort, and he was bitterly disappointed when the appointment failed to materialize. After some soul searching, he appealed to his Canadian friends for a fitting position to serve his country of birth.

But Aitken was not without his faults. Borden was unsure if Aitken, who still had powerful enemies among the Canadian business elite, was more of a handicap than an advantage. Undeterred by Borden’s lukewarm responses to his initial offer of assistance, Aitken appealed to Sam Hughes at the end of 1914, claiming that the “most important section of London Press agrees to give me opportunity to de-

scribe Canadian mobilization in series of illustrated articles.” His fervent desire to assist was evident, and he was confident that he could be of “service in the whole Canadian situation.”⁷ However, this service did not extend to enlisting in the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF); he was far too rich and plagued by asthma to serve in the front lines.

On Hughes’s urging, the Canadian Cabinet appointed Aitken to the position of Eye Witness, in which he would supply Canadians with wartime information.⁸ When Hughes’s desire to command the Canadian Division had been politely turned down by the British in favour of selecting an experienced imperial general – E.A.H. Alderson – the minister attempted to influence operations from Canada. Max Aitken would be his eyes in London. Moreover, with an honorary appointment of lieutenant colonel and his own immense funds, Aitken took it upon himself to expand his role within the confused Canadian military hierarchy. Due to an ingrained belief in patronage politics and a desire to keep power in his own hands, Hughes had appointed several commanders in England to administer the Canadian forces, most of whom disliked each other, had overlapping duties, and were in direct conflict with one another.⁹ With the British warily standing back and observing this colonial administrative chaos, Aitken, ever successful at exploiting situations, ensured that his role as Eye Witness would include liaising with the British at General Headquarters.

As Hughes’s confidant, Aitken’s authorization to sit in on British General Headquarters meetings as the Canadian representative at the front gave the minister unparalleled access to information. Aitken’s duties, as he reported them to the prime minister, were to keep Hughes informed of British decisions and to act as a rallying point where difficulties between the British and Canadians could be worked out.¹⁰ For much of 1915 Aitken was, in most cases, the primary contact for the British when they were forced to deal with the unstable Hughes. The mercurial minister of Militia and Defence frequently displayed poor judgment in sending off missives from Canada that were both insulting and antagonistic to imperial generals and politicians. As a result, Aitken earned the trust of senior British officers for his ability to defuse military-civilian conflicts between the two countries.¹¹ Hughes “makes demands on me almost daily,” noted Aitken, and the minister’s reliance on him strengthened Aitken’s role in the Canadian overseas hierarchy.¹² By early 1916, however, Aitken had been reined in: his unofficial role as a liaison with the British was handed to a friend, Lieutenant Colonel R.F. Manly Sims.

The liaison role had been far beyond Aitken’s mandate, but it had placed him in an ideal position to expand on his Eye Witness project, and even afterwards, Sims continued to supply Aitken with important military information. Aitken described his goals this way: “to follow the fortunes of the First Division in France, to share its experiences, and to give the public of Canada an account of the performances

of its regiments, and finally to enshrine in a contemporary history those exploits which will make the First Division immortal.¹³ He would be the self-appointed historian and publicist for the Canadian overseas forces.

To document the war work of the Canadian Division, Aitken travelled behind the front in his Rolls-Royce and interviewed scores of Canadian soldiers and officers in the field. He became a recognized figure and was adept at drawing stories out of tired men, even when the staff officers at the rear disliked his involvement.¹⁴ Aitken's role was nearly unique as there were few war correspondents at the front.¹⁵ Moreover, when he encountered problems with British staff officers bent on enforcing rules to quash all unauthorized information, Aitken utilized his status as special envoy for the Canadian government, as well as his influential position in the Conservative Party, to ensure that he was not impeded. An opponent of censorship throughout the war, Aitken was able to force the military's hand and to relax its strict rules regarding the dissemination of information to the public. "The trouble about the Eye Witness business is that the Eye Witness is ipso facto more or less official," wrote one army censor. "I could not undertake to vet the writings of the correspondent with regard to the truth."¹⁶ His information-gathering skills, money, and official status placed him in a better position to comprehend the events of war than any other person in the CEF. And while General Alderson neither trusted nor liked him, the more junior Canadian brigadier generals and battalion commanders were generally enthusiastic in supporting Aitken, the man who was to chronicle and publicize their actions.¹⁷ In addition to sending back weekly communiqués to Borden and the Canadian government, Aitken's journalistic accounts were published widely in Canadian newspapers. His very readable narratives must have been reassuring for many Canadian families. That was all to change in less than a month, however, as the Canadian Division would be shattered at the Battle of Second Ypres.

As part of an allied British and French force, the inexperienced Canadian Division was ordered to hold a portion of the Ypres salient, a rounded position several miles across that jutted into the German lines and was surrounded on three sides by high ground, which was used to full effect by the German artillery. Although there had been ample warnings of a forthcoming offensive, the Allied armies were caught unprepared for the overwhelming assault that was launched behind the first lethal chlorine gas attack of the war. The gas cloud rolled over the two French territorial and colonial divisions to the left of the Canadians, causing a panicked rout. However, the Canadians held their ground, shifted to cover the now gaping hole in the line, launched counterattacks, and repulsed the Germans in a resolute defence. Two days later, the Canadians were the victims of a second chlorine gas cloud. Those soldiers caught in its path were suffocated outright or left to defend their trenches, gasping and wheezing through ravaged lungs. The Canadians were

pushed back into their own lines over the front, but they did not break, ensuring that the two British divisions to the south were not enveloped. In a week of fighting, the division's grim stand had cost 6,000 casualties. And it was Max Aitken who reported on the action.

Canada's Eye Witness made his name – as well as that of the Canadian Division – significantly more prominent with his vivid account of the heroic Canadian stand at Ypres. Aitken's piece was published on 1 May 1915, and through his friendships with other press barons, his own newspapers, and his position as Eye Witness, his account of the brave Dominion soldiers was read widely throughout the Empire.

It appeared that the untried Canadian Division had stopped the Germans alone. The idea that Canadian troops were holding out against impossible odds and the nefarious release of chlorine gas resulted in a stirring narrative for readers in the super-charged patriotic atmosphere in England and in Canada. "The battle ... was bloody, even as men appraise battles in this callous and life-engulfing war." The Canadians were, according to Aitken, "enormously outnumbered" and their performance was "amazing" as the division consisted of "men who ... at the outbreak of the war were neither disciplined nor trained."¹⁸ Further accounts stressed that the division was formed by the "Canadian people," who had joined partly for the "glory of adventure but more of the spirit of self-sacrifice."¹⁹ Aitken turned the battle into an epic story, in line with the rousing accounts of the British Army's last stands against legions of natives in one of their many nineteenth-century colonial battles. This time, though, it was the Canadian boys who held off overwhelming odds, falling in droves, but keeping chins up, and eventually stopping the hordes of Huns advancing behind their death clouds. Aitken's success in carving out a distinguished record for the Canadians as an almost separate fighting force, rather than as Dominion troops fighting within a much larger British Expeditionary Force (BEF) structure, left some British politicians and officers complaining that it appeared to be only the Canadians fighting the Germans, with a little support from the British.²⁰ They were not, of course, but Aitken's publicity machine was far more effective than that supporting British troops. With the focused nature of his writing, Aitken's account of the Canadians, along with their obvious bravery in battle, began to forge their reputation.

With his journalistic success, Aitken realized that the Canadians needed more than one man to disseminate information about their deeds. He began to build a small office to both protect the Canadian war records and to fashion propaganda on Canadian military exploits. As early as January 1915, Aitken had reported to Hughes that the Canadian records kept by the British at the War Office were "in a state of chaos."²¹ This did not sit well with the minister who was already smarting from being denied the opportunity to command and who felt that the British

were consistently displaying a haughty attitude towards him and his soldiers. With the full support of Hughes and Borden, and in the wake of his celebrated Ypres account, Aitken acquired a new role for himself as the official Canadian Records Officer in May 1915.²²

With this title, he began to negotiate with the British Historical Section of the Committee of Imperial Defence to gain possession of the original Canadian War Diaries and operational war records. In one of the most prescient moves related to documenting the war, Aitken – once again at his own behest – pushed for and succeeded in controlling the records and thus the future history of the CEF. The nation that oversees its own archives is able to shape and manufacture its own history and eventually guard its own memory while creating its own identity. Aitken realized this from the start and believed in leaving a legacy of war records that would “lay down the bedrock of history.”²³

The success of the Second Ypres story propelled Aitken towards a full-length monograph on the subject in order to “keep popular interest in the army alive, and above all to stimulate that local pride in local regiments which is the foundation of the Canadian Corps.”²⁴ From June 1915 onward, Aitken pored over the War Diaries, interviewed surviving officers, and crafted his battle narrative.²⁵

AITKEN PUBLISHED *Canada in Flanders* in January 1916 to considerable public acclaim, with the book going through four printings in the first month, and twelve printings by March.²⁶ *The Evening Standard* reported, “The heroic deeds of the Canadians at Ypres make me tingle with pride to be a kinsman to such soldiers. Fruit farmers, editors and ranchers all showed themselves to be of the finest fighting stuff of the world.” *The Daily Express* also picked up on the notion of the volunteer contingent: the author “points out, over and over again, that the Canadian Army is almost entirely an army of amateurs ... This fact is of immense significance, particularly as it is equally true of the greater part of the British forces.” Aitken was lauded for his evocative prose and the fact that his work, unlike that of so much of the war writing to date, was based on, as one reviewer noted, “a large number of military diaries and official documentation.”²⁷ Subtitled the “official story of the CEF,” here, finally, was history based on trusted sources, created by the soldiers themselves, and dutifully reported by their Eye Witness.

Supremely patriotic, sanitized, and uncritical, *Canada in Flanders* must be viewed as a product of its time. Ever the newspaperman and deeply aware of what the public wanted, Aitken focused on telling the story of all men, not just the officers, in order to reach out to the millions of family members and friends left behind in Canada and England. Following the precedent of his first Ypres communiqué, he included regimental names and even personal accounts of bravery and sacrifice in his “heroic” history. These revelations resulted in tensions with the British censors, who were dogmatic in refusing to allow the release of information that they

believed would hurt the war effort. Refusing to be cowed, however, Aitken fought against these “intolerable delays” with all the support of his political allies. He eventually convinced Hughes to appeal personally to the War Office to have the censors cease and desist.²⁸ Aitken believed in the importance of uniting the nation behind the war effort, and he found it absurd that the inclusion of individual soldiers’ names – the very people with whom those at home could identify – would somehow endanger military intelligence. As Aitken wryly noted later in the war while still trying to profile the Canadian actions, “here the spirit was willing but the censorship was by no means weak.”²⁹ But with his considerable influence, Aitken succeeded in passing *Canada in Flanders* through the censors, and his was one of the first popular histories, along with Ian Hay’s *The First Hundred Thousand* (1915), to reach the public.

Canada in Flanders was indeed, as the reviewers suggested, an important work for breaking the rigorous censorship rules, emphasizing the importance of individuals, and creating a new pantheon of heroes. While *Canada in Flanders* was written in an heroic style, Aitken had also employed war records to impart a sense of authenticity. Nevertheless, he struggled with his history, acknowledging that the account was necessarily “incomplete and partial.” Instead, he aimed to bridge the gap between the firing line and the home front. He purposely stayed clear of the controversies surrounding the battle, such as the poor control exhibited by General Alderson, the mishandling of the 3rd Brigade’s battalions by Brigadier General Richard Turner, and even the confusing retirement from the front to gather reinforcements on 24 April by Brigadier General Arthur Currie.³⁰ “It is in no case a grateful task to write a contemporary history,” admitted Aitken, and “nothing can be attempted except a kind of rough justice.”³¹

AFTER CHRONICLING the Canadians in action, Aitken did not have the time nor seemingly the inclination to visit the front again after witnessing the grim fighting of Second Ypres. Instead, he gathered a small team of wounded veterans and experienced writers to assist him in carrying out his twin mandates of collecting war records and publicizing the Canadian Corps. The Canadian War Records Office (CWRO) was established in January 1916.

Realizing that his vision of leaving a legacy of records would not have been possible if he waited for financial support from the budget-conscious Canadian government, Aitken paid for the CWRO, including the hiring of staff and the purchase of all supplies, out of his own pocket for six months before the government allocated \$25,000 to cover some of the costs. In rooms donated by the Public Record Office, the CWRO staff registered, arranged, and examined the Canadian War Diaries sent to them from the field. Other historical material was also collected to better document the CEF, both units training in England and those serving in France and Belgium. General and routine orders, badges, honours, and awards

conferred on officers and men, photographs, soldier-published trench newspapers, and an assortment of other historical ephemera were gathered and catalogued. Later in the war, the CWRO would actively create records to capture the Canadian war experience. Photographers, war artists, cinematographers, and historical officers would go into the field to capture their countrymen's actions for all history. "My office," wrote Aitken, "has a voracious appetite for historical documents."³²

The CWRO became much more than a simple archives, however. Aitken was one of the principal figures administering the Canadian forces in England. Henry Beckles Willson, who worked briefly in the CWRO, gave a description of the organization: it was almost "a corps headquarters in the field ... It was as if Aitken had clandestinely built up a simulacrum of Sir Sam Hughes's office in Ottawa, where place-hunters, contractors, officials, politicians and pressmen came and went all day ... It was, in effect, the real and immediate source of authority of the Canadian Corps in Europe."³³ Willson's exaggerated prose should not detract from Aitken's importance in England. He was recognized by his friends as a man of importance and feared by his enemies as a force to be reckoned with.

From the start, Aitken began to build his historical empire by making sure that senior officers in both England and France knew that he was now responsible for documenting the war and ensuring a legacy for the Canadian soldier. There were stumbling blocks, however. Alderson was particularly concerned that Aitken, whom he rightly associated with Sam Hughes, the minister who constantly interfered in the command of his Canadian Corps, would uncover and publish secret documents.³⁴ With his honorary military status, Aitken appeared to be just another political crony. To be clear, this was exactly what Aitken was – yet, at the same time, he took his role as CEF archivist and historian seriously. If the responsibility of guarding documents for future generations did not sway the corps commander, the Eye Witness could reposition himself by promising not to reveal battle secrets irresponsibly but, instead, to "make the deeds of Canada shine brightly in this War. No effort will be spared to attain this end."³⁵ Aitken needed the war records not only to create a proper historical legacy but also to add legitimacy to his publicity projects. Even though Aitken was willing to present the Canadians in the best possible light in his publications, there is no evidence that the CWRO's staff censored or destroyed damning war records.

As Aitken moved from Eye Witness to official record keeper and unofficial publicist, he was assisted by several gifted individuals in his goals: Lieutenant Colonel (later Brigadier General) R.F. Manly Sims, a former British regular officer and businessman, was his chief liaison officer in France; Captain Theodore G. Roberts, the younger brother of the New Brunswick poet and writer Charles G.D. Roberts, took up much of the day-to-day writing; Henry Beckles Willson, historian and man-of-letters, was in charge of War Diaries until his stormy relationship with

Aitken forced his resignation; and later, Talbot Papineau, a well-known French-Canadian nationalist, collected war records and wrote dispatches before returning to the front where he was killed. The CWRO's self-proclaimed guiding principle was to be the "spokesman for the Canadian Army; it was the official reporter of what was good to report; it was the eyes and the pen of the great inarticulate mass of men who were too busy fighting to tell just how they were fighting."³⁶ The CWRO officers may have been the spokesmen for the army, but they certainly were not neutral or objective in their approach – they judged what to report, and they defined what was to be emphasized and what would be forgotten.

Alderson remained wary of Aitken, but with his removal from command in May 1916, the CWRO had a better relationship with the new corps commander, Lieutenant General Sir Julian Byng. Attesting to his power, Aitken had orchestrated the dirty business of undermining Alderson's position, ensuring that General Sir Douglas Haig, commander of the BEF, kept the questionably competent Canadian-born Major General Richard Turner, VC, in command of the 2nd Division while at the same time sacrificing Alderson for the sake of good relations between the Canadians and the British.³⁷ As Hughes's right-hand man in England, Aitken was more than an archivist gathering records for some future official historian: this was the man who had manipulated the command of brigades and battalions, had the Canadian Corps commander removed, and would, in due course, have a hand in bringing down the Asquith government.³⁸ "Sir Max Aitken is a power in the land – at present – has immense influence in both Canadian and English governments and consequently upon the Army," wrote one observer.³⁹ Although Byng despised civilian interference from Canada and Britain, he was astute enough to curry favour with the powerful Sir Max whenever he had a chance. And if that meant allowing records to be collected or journalistic pieces to be written, even if they went against his professional and personal instincts, then so be it.⁴⁰

DOMINION ARCHIVIST ARTHUR DOUGHTY described the war to Sam Hughes in early 1916 as the "outstanding event in Canadian history for generations to come."⁴¹ Doughty was born in England, attended Oxford, and emigrated to Canada at the age of twenty-six. He worked as a journalist and was a respected literary and cultural figure, specializing in the arts before joining the Public Service in Quebec. In 1904 Doughty was appointed dominion archivist. Under his tenure he built up the Public Archives from an underfunded institution into "a treasure house of Canadian history," which collected and made available documents, maps, photographs, works of art, and even artifacts.⁴² As a respected historian, a friend and advisor to senior politicians and even prime ministers such as Wilfrid Laurier, Robert Borden, and later, William Lyon Mackenzie King, Doughty was a part of Ottawa's social elite and no political neophyte.

Aitken, as we have seen, was also well aware of the enormity of the war and the need to document the role played by his countrymen. This put Doughty in a difficult position: while Hughes had appointed Aitken as the CEF's Records Officer, it was Doughty who was responsible to the Canadian people for gathering Canadian records of importance and saving them for posterity in the Public Archives. Here was the most important event of his generation, and probably for several generations, and some mischievous millionaire gnome had taken his job.

In December 1915 Doughty had written to his minister, P.E. Blondin, requesting that he should be sent overseas to collect official and private records relating to the CEF.⁴³ Doughty was suspicious of Aitken, with his shady background and absolute inexperience in history or archives. He remarked to Sir Edmund Walker, president of the Bank of Commerce, that he was going to save the war records in order that a "true account of Canada in the war could be written ... [and] so that we shall not depend on such men as Sir Max Aitken."⁴⁴ Doughty also wanted to ensure that the records were to become the property of the Public Archives after the war and not become stored in some English museum or, worse, find their way into the hands of a private individual.⁴⁵

Wearing his new uniform and sporting an honorary rank of major (later colonel), Doughty strode into the London offices of the CWRO in the summer of 1916, announcing forcefully to Aitken and his assistant, Lieutenant Henry Beckles Willson, "that, as Dominion Archivist, all Canadian records – civil, naval, and military – were by statute under his control." With that he promptly turned around and exited, leaving the stunned staff eyeing one another. "I forgot who burst into laughter first," wrote Willson in his diary.⁴⁶ Although Doughty's legendary skills at convincing the richest families of Europe to pass their records to the Public Archives seemed mostly absent in this meeting, perhaps the dominion archivist was understandably nervous in confronting Sir Max.

Yet Aitken, realizing that he had overstepped his narrow mandate and aware of Doughty's prestige, not to mention his expertise, chose not to cross swords. Rather, he placated him. His great manoeuvring in business proved that he could do the same in the field of archives. Aitken was able to convince Doughty to relinquish his hold on this future archives for the duration of the war. As part of the negotiations, however, Aitken reiterated his promise to transfer all records to the Public Archives after the war, and he would indeed welcome all advice that the experienced Doughty could provide relating to record keeping.⁴⁷ That was enough for Doughty who later wrote: "Sir Max is indefatigable." At the same time, Doughty thought it "strange to find him engaged in the work of making a record of the war. He is evidently in earnest about it and is determined to make it a success."⁴⁸ Indeed, Aitken was. However, it was "strange" to find a man so powerful as Aitken engaged in the historical and record-keeping process of the CWRO. What could explain it?

Aitken was always an enigma, and Doughty was only one of many who were unsure if he was motivated by “politics or pure patriotism.”⁴⁹ Others were more doubtful and not so easily won over. Although the act of archiving was foreign to Aitken, his actions were incredibly far-sighted and he was carrying out a more active acquisition policy than anything advocated by any Canadian officer or archivist at the time. Of course, the publicity aspect of the CWRO was equally important to him, and that was an area where he, as a newspaper baron, had more experience. As Doughty wrote, “Whatever may be his motive he is doing the work well ... [he] is the right man in the right place.”⁵⁰ Any analysis of Aitken and his passion for the dual roles of the CWRO must acknowledge that all of this work was carried out under his own initiative. Aitken believed deeply in supporting his countrymen in this terrible conflict; he would not stand for interference from anyone in his quest to elevate the Canadian soldier in the eyes of the world or to leave an historical legacy for others to do so in the future.

WITH BYNG’S CONTINUED SUPPORT, R.F. Manly Sims and Theodore Roberts, who were collecting war records at the front, supplied Aitken with information for the CWRO’s newspaper communiqués and for the preparation of a second volume of *Canada in Flanders*.⁵¹ However, this was never easy, and Manly Sims confided to Aitken, who was anxious to receive records of the Canadian fighting at Mount Sorrel in June 1916, that he would need a “seer” to understand the true picture of the battle.⁵² The confusion and chaos of attack and counterattack did not lend itself to an easy retelling, primarily since most of the witnesses were dead, maimed, or had seen little and understood less outside of their couple of hundred metres of battlefield. Noting that War Diaries and appendices varied in quality, Aitken appealed to Byng to reiterate to his subordinates the importance of keeping accurate and detailed war records.⁵³ The corps commander did this through a series of orders – one going so far as to warn that, “units which have not kept full and accurate reports may find that injustice has been done to them in [future] historical works.”⁵⁴ Despite such threats, it was found that many units still produced weak War Diaries and operational reports that failed to provide adequate information or coverage. The 18th Battalion’s War Diary on the Somme was so useless that someone within the regiment added a note: “Not much help to a historian.”⁵⁵ Understanding the need to gather war records and ensure their creation at the front prompted a small team of CWRO officers to be stationed in France.

There had been no CWRO representative on the Somme battlefield from September to November 1916, and the War Diaries and reports created there were considerably weaker than earlier historical records. With horrific casualties, it was not uncommon to lose most forward officers in an engagement, thereby leaving no one qualified to write up the reports of operations. At other times the strain of battle ensured that “some of the diaries are so illegible that they can scarcely be

read.”⁵⁶ The CWRO field historians, therefore, played an important role in assisting in the creation of records. This active intervention and actual authoring of war records in some cases was essential for providing documentary evidence of the ebb and flow of the war; as one CWRO report noted, “these records were snatched from the firing line and from men still red hot from the fiery ordeal of action.” In the war records lay the “rigid testimony of truth,” which must not “be allowed to perish with” the men who created them.⁵⁷ Without the CWRO’s intercession, the records available to subsequent generations of Canadians and historians would have been far less comprehensive.⁵⁸

In addition to the collection of war records, the CWRO historical officers assisted the regimental war diarists and officers tasked with writing up operations. Besides being overworked, exhausted, and sometimes without the necessary literary skills, the battalion war diarists often did not have a full picture of a battle. How were they to describe an engagement raging across a broad front when they were stationed at rear headquarters? As a result, they often turned to the historical officers to supply them with information or add overlooked details. Captain Talbot Papineau described his role as an historical officer in the field, emphasizing in a letter home that, “You must understand that I am not a mere newspaper correspondent. Nothing makes me angrier. I write many official staff documents as well. For instance yesterday I made a complete tour of our whole battle front – interviewed almost all the Battalion commanders – personally examined the enemy lines and finally wrote a long report which the General favourably commented upon today.”⁵⁹

By the summer of 1917, the CWRO had two officers in France, Lieutenant W. Douglas and Captain I.T. Robertson. Throughout the last half of the year, these two officers visited 263 units in the field to “impress on all concerned the importance which is attached to them for historical point of view ... We found in a large number of cases that the object of a War Diary was not realized; that, in fact, it was generally regarded merely as an official return, to be rendered more or less perfunctorily every month. In other cases we encountered the belief that it was not permissible to include full details of an operation, much of the data being regarded as of a secret and confidential nature.” Their work, then, was in winning over the confidence of officers who were sometimes “afraid of saying too much, thinking it might be regarded as ‘hot air’, a thing all fighting men abhor.” Equally important, the records officers were to ensure that documents, be they old operational orders, a scrawled note from a company commander, or a map tracing, were not destroyed in the field by those who might not understand their significance.⁶⁰

The historical records improved dramatically with the appointment of roving CWRO officers in France.⁶¹ “The nature of modern war is the prevalence of confused and protracted struggles where the range of vision is limited to a few yards

and each small group or unit is aware of nothing but what is happening in its immediate neighbourhood,” opined one CWRO report. “And yet it is precisely the stories of these groups which make up the battle as the fragments make up the mosaic, and which yet so seldom penetrates as far as the War Records Office, and through it to posterity. A Company Report or a really extensive and well-written account of an action composed by a Battalion Commander is, therefore, of priceless value, but such things are more rare than they should be, and every day makes them more irreplaceable as memory fades and the witnesses disperse.”⁶²

The role of the CWRO was not only to improve the quality of the records, but also to actively seek out participants and shape the content of the war record. In assessing the work of the CWRO, Doughty believed that Aitken and his staff had adequately carried out their mandate of archiving the war records, which “will greatly facilitate the work of historians in the future.”⁶³

All of this active work in creating and safeguarding records had been the result of the energetic interventions by Sir Max Aitken. However, he would not stop there. As part of his desire to promote Canadian soldiers, Aitken hoped to commemorate their deeds by producing a collection of their own writings. With that in mind and basing the project on the very successful Australian *Anzac Book*, he instructed Manly Sims in July 1916 to write to commanding officers that the CWRO wished to publish stories, poems, cartoons, and personal accounts of battle from frontline soldiers in a commemorative “war book for the masses.”⁶⁴ Unfortunately, the response by most Canadian soldiers was lukewarm. Even then, Aitken complained that the submissions he did receive were “of very low order.”⁶⁵ As such, he chose only those works that conformed to his own image of the Canadian soldier.⁶⁶ Accounts that emphasized fear and bitterness were excluded in favour of stories emphasizing abilities to stick it out and remain cool under fire. One submission read: “A C.O. detailed two Highlanders to escort four German Prisoners back to the prisoners’ pen, about one and half miles in the rear. In less than ten minutes they returned, and being questioned by the C.O., about the four German prisoners, replied; – ‘They all dropped dead Sir, and we didna [sic] want to miss this fight, so we returned.’”⁶⁷ Titled “Fact,” the passage was both a mixture of trench humour and the grim nature of fighting on the Western Front – both considerations that were largely unknown to those on the home front. However, a record of the deliberate execution of German prisoners did not fit into Aitken’s vision of a book that would glorify Canadian deeds. “Fact” was never published, and instead readers were treated to a collection of anecdotes of the “stiff-upper lip” variety that spoke to bravery, sacrifice, and nationalistic aspirations.

Although touted as a work by Canadian soldiers for Canadian soldiers, volume 1 of this commemorative work, published in January 1917 and entitled *Canada in Khaki*, consisted of a large number of journalistic and CWRO accounts, not to

mention articles by Sir George Perley and other noteworthy Canadians. Nonetheless, there were poems and cartoons from soldiers that gave the journal a sense of authenticity. It was immensely successful, selling 40,000 copies in the first week.⁶⁸ Two more volumes followed, each selling tens of thousands of copies, and *Canada in Khaki* helped to create an image of the Canadian soldier that was thoroughly different from that of the British Tommy.

Yet what defined the Canadian soldier? Looking at the First Contingent, it was clear that the Canadian soldier was more likely to be British born than anything else. But with Aitken's products, the line between Canadian and Briton became blurred. *Canada in Khaki* is a useful example for analyzing Aitken's approach to myth making. Perley wrote that the Canadian forces were "native-born, British-born, and young men from all the varied races that in recent years have been carried by the tide of immigration into the Golden West." T.G. Roberts, Aitken's most trusted writer at the CWRO, went one step further, musing that although some of the Canadians may have been born outside of Canada, "He is no less a Canadian, either in his own heart or in the hearts of his friends ... Whatever a man used to be, he is now what his cap badge proclaims him." These Canadian soldiers were, according to A.M. De Beck, editor of *Canadian News*, and another contributor to the journal, "Men from the prairies, from the wheat fields and the lumber-yards of the West; men accustomed to the saddle and to sport of all kinds; men who can wield an axe more deftly than I can hold a pen; men accustomed to face death twenty times a year or more, and who have waged war with Nature or with wild beasts all their lives – what wonder that they sprang to the call of war as surely never men sprang before. The clash of battle was as music in their ears." This "hardy breed of men, the stalwart children of nature" seemed, according to *Canada in Khaki*, bred for war. One final example must suffice: a cartoon by H.M. Bateman, entitled "The Canadian in Peace and War, as Imagined by an English Artist," goes to the heart of the image that Aitken was trying to construct. The drawing showed a young man stalking a bear, lumberjacks sitting on a great log, voyageurs exploring the land, gold prospectors striking it rich, and cowboys shooting bottles off a barrel. This "peacetime" iconography led directly to an image of a Canadian infantryman with bayonet herding three German prisoners through the line. Depicting a devil-may-care grin and stone-hewn features on the Canadian soldier, it was clear that our English artist clearly equated the rugged Canadian land with a rough and determined soldier. From cartoons, photographs, and editorials, a unique image of the Canadian soldier was being constructed in the pages of the CWRO-sponsored works.⁶⁹

Along with these publications, Aitken felt that the public should have a chance to experience the deeds of the Canadian Corps by visualizing their exploits: "We must see our men climbing out of the trenches to the assault before we can realise the patience, the exhaustion, and the courage which are assets and the trials of

modern fighting men.”⁷⁰ Aitken would ensure that not only did the people of Canada know exactly what their sons, brothers, husbands, and fathers were doing in France and Belgium, but also that the rest of the world was told – over and over again – that it was Canadian soldiers fighting as a distinct unit, rather than as colonial cannon-fodder within the larger BEF, who were contributing to winning this war. Although it is beyond the scope of this work, Aitken also organized a media blitz involving photographs, film, and art. It is most remarkable that once again it was Aitken who, in order to meet his self-declared dual mandate of publicizing and documenting the war, forged ahead and established official photographers, cinematographers, and artists to document the war for future generations.⁷¹ “There is no event of any importance that ever happens up and down that long line in France,” boasted the CWRO, “which is not chronicled, photographed or painted for the benefit of the people who sit at home.”⁷²

THE “MAD MULLAH” OF CANADA, Sir Sam Hughes, was finally removed from Borden’s Cabinet in December 1916 for increasingly erratic behaviour.⁷³ There were few tears for the former minister and one of his veteran Cabinet colleagues, Sir George Foster, aptly summed up the situation: “the nightmare is removed.”⁷⁴ Hughes had served his country as best he could: his supporters would note his successful prewar preparation of the Militia and his orchestration of the First Contingent in a timely fashion; his detractors fumed at the disorder he had sown by attempting to maintain control of the overseas forces from Ottawa. However one views Hughes – and historians have not treated him kindly – Aitken’s service to, and close friendship with, the minister from 1914 to 1916 had paid historical dividends.⁷⁵ Aitken would no longer liaise with the British military and he would no longer influence the appointment of senior Canadian officers. Nonetheless, Aitken had firmly entrenched his small historical empire in the administrative structure, and no one was willing to take on the aggressive Sir Max, even without his former political backing. At the same time, despite having been heavily involved in British politics and having conspired to bring Lloyd George to power, he had not been asked to join the Cabinet. Once again he was bitterly disappointed. Aitken later claimed to friends that he found solace in building an “historical legacy” for Canada, both in a war archives and in creating a war legend.⁷⁶

In addition to its multimedia productions, the CWRO continued to focus on writing full-length monographs, with volumes 2 and 3 of *Canada in Flanders* published in the spring of 1917 and early 1918. With the success of volume 1, both in sales and in public acclaim, based partially on his access to the war records, Aitken used his CWRO officers in the field to supply him with information and documents relating to the 1916 battles of St. Eloi and Mount Sorrel. As both engagements were particularly costly – St. Eloi was an outright Canadian failure – Sir Max shied away from the controversies and again focused on the heroic nature of

the Canadian soldier. With St. Eloi, Aitken struggled to portray the actions of confused Canadian soldiers who had been lost on the battlefield, holding the wrong parts of the front and, as a result, had eventually been pushed back by a German counterattack. Aitken had gathered damning testimony that suggested at least a few of the Canadians had reconnoitred the ground and ascertained which parts of the front they actually held, but that this information had been overlooked by Major General Richard Turner's divisional staff. The diary of Captain D.E. McIntyre, the intelligence officer of the 6th Brigade, noted clearly that he had reported on 6 April 1916 that the Germans held the craters at the front and not the Canadians as battalion, brigade, and divisional headquarters believed. Sir Max Aitken tried to deal with this evidence by writing around the question of what the divisional headquarters knew at the time, but in his fourth draft, he struck out large portions of his account, including: "It is curious that his [McIntyre's] observation did not dissipate the error about the craters in the minds of the High Command."⁷⁷ In this case of self-censorship, Aitken felt that it was worth avoiding the issue to protect the reputations of Turner and the Canadians, rather than expose the truth that might have tarnished their collective war record. Despite following a similar style and structure, volume 2 was not nearly as popular as volume 1.

By 1917 the energies of the CWRO were spread thin. The responsibilities included overseeing the collection of war records, the official photographs, film and art programs, as well as liaising with journalists and newspapers. The printed word of semi-official histories had been partly supplanted by a host of other publicity tools. There were, moreover, many other British histories that had been published since the first volume of *Canada in Flanders*. But the series remained authoritative for many Canadians, and if the second and third volumes did not have the same influence as the first groundbreaking effort, they were still important in laying the foundation for subsequent historical interpretations. And it was Sir Max Aitken, rather than the soldiers themselves, who was the progenitor of this Canadian interpretation of the war, which he crafted from access to their war records, firsthand accounts, and his own belief in how the battles should be portrayed.

But Aitken had begun to lose interest in day-to-day operations at CWRO in 1917. He was still making all key decisions and lending his name and title to ensure that the CWRO received adequate support, but most of the work was delegated to junior officers. As part of this devolution, Lord Beaverbrook (he had been elevated to the peerage at the end of 1916) handed the reins over to Charles G.D. Roberts to complete volume 3 of *Canada in Flanders*, which would focus on the 1916 Battle of the Somme. With his sturdy build, strongly lined face, and toothbrush moustache, the fifty-seven-year-old Roberts looked comfortable in his British major's uniform. Roberts was one of Canada's most prominent poets and although he would author the third volume, Beaverbrook remained the chief overseer of the series, insisting every so often on editorial changes or that evidence be collected from the

War Diaries to magnify the “heroic deeds” of the Canadians.⁷⁸ Amid the grim fighting of the Somme, where 24,000 Canadians became casualties from September to November 1916, there were indeed many stories of sacrifice and bravery. These were emphasized over the futility of a battle that swallowed materiel and men at an unprecedented rate. The image of senseless slaughter that would later come to the foreground in the late 1920s with the outpourings of the “disillusioned” generation, was, under Beaverbrook’s guiding hand, subsumed to this heroic notion of brave Canadian lads winning the war.

The writing of contemporary history is always difficult, especially when one’s subjects are alive or recently martyred, and it is all the more trying during the uncertainty of an ongoing war. Despite their overwhelming success among the public, all three volumes of *Canada in Flanders* were subject to criticisms by Canadian soldiers.⁷⁹ The innate suspicion of soldiers at the front of all things in the rear (basically anything farther back than company headquarters) was keenly directed towards Beaverbrook’s work. For those who already knew about his close ties to Hughes, there was the added misgiving that Beaverbrook was producing political propaganda to prop up his friends. Certainly Generals Sir Richard Turner, Garnet Hughes, and David Watson received aid, with the Eye Witness even going so far as to manipulate the appointment of commanding officers to ensure that his friends received their proper due – for example, saving Turner’s job after St. Eloi; ensuring that Hughes (the minister’s son) received command of the 1st Brigade and later the 5th Division; and removing competitors to Watson so that he was given the 4th Division.⁸⁰ That is not to say that without Beaverbrook’s support others did not thrive – as generals such as Louis Lipsett, Archibald Macdonell, and Arthur Currie obviously did – but it was clear to many in the highly political and partisan Canadian military structure that Aitken looked out for his friends. Would he also do so in his histories? Some certainly thought so, and when volume 3 of *Canada in Flanders* was published in early 1918, the Canadian Corps commander, Lieutenant General Sir Arthur Currie, responded with vehement criticism.

With his appointment as corps commander in June 1917, Currie was the first Canadian-born officer to take the position. He had been a Militia officer before the war and what he lacked in military appearance – with his pear-shaped body seemingly ready to topple from his horse – he made up for with a planned, methodical approach to warfare. Although Currie had little charisma with which to inspire his men, he was one of the finest generals in the war, leading the Canadian Corps to a series of victories.

While Currie was fully engaged in perfecting the fighting capabilities of his corps, he was also highly cognizant of how he and his men would be remembered in history. When the general read the most recent volume of *Canada in Flanders* and found that his former division, the 1st, had been nearly left out, he was furious that this self-styled “official history” had slandered the memory of his men and their

accomplishments on the Somme. Currie fumed in letters to both Prime Minister Borden and Overseas Minister Kemp that “it is my opinion that no one should have the privilege of publishing to the world a work described as the official story of the Canadian Expeditionary Force which is not a true narrative of the facts.” One of the most vicious battles of the campaign, the 26 September attack on Regina Trench received only five lines, and according to Currie, his men had been denigrated by a history that proclaimed at no time “did the attacking troops get within striking distance of this last objective.” That was untrue, as the 2nd and 3rd Brigades had reached the enemy trenches, suffering 2,800 casualties and receiving over 100 honours and decorations. But the loss of nearly 3,000 1st Division soldiers for no appreciable gain was not the image that Beaverbrook and the CWRO wished to portray to the public. The work of Currie’s division had indeed been overlooked; moreover, what was written was inaccurate. Currie insisted that this slight was intentional and raged that the author, Roberts, never even came to see him while he was researching the narrative, this despite being at his headquarters.⁸¹ Seething that the history had “no value whatever as an historical document,” Currie was largely accurate in his criticisms.

Roberts had indeed written an uneven history of the Canadians on the Somme. Despite his reputation as a celebrated writer and poet, no major wished to feel the full wrath of his corps commander, and so Roberts pleaded in a personal letter for “allowances” when one has a “huge mass of undigested material, often conflicting, to deal with in a very limited time.” But the focus of volume 3 was on the 2nd Division’s attack at Courcellette on 15 September 1916, rather than the less successful and costly battles that followed (by the 1st, 3rd, and 4th Canadian Divisions), because he was writing in a style that mimicked Beaverbrook’s own work. The CWRO histories emphasized Canadian success, which was very evident at Courcellette, and downplayed the failures. Although Currie demanded more recognition for his men, and a balanced history would have reflected it, he probably would not have wanted Roberts to reveal the futility of the attack, the uncut barbed wire that funnelled the infantry into killing grounds, and the uneven artillery barrage that left his troops vulnerable while crossing No Man’s Land. The objectivity of history had been sacrificed at the altar of shaping public opinion and encouraging support for the war.

Despite Currie’s demands for more historical accuracy – or, more likely, for greater coverage that emphasized the bravery and sacrifice of the 1st Division – Beaverbrook was unmoved. Having been appointed to Lloyd George’s War Cabinet as minister of Information in March 1918, Beaverbrook did not readily accept Currie’s criticisms, writing that with the “fortunes of war ... a history cannot be divided off into spaces equally allotted to each unit.” That was true, but units, and especially their powerful commanders, could and did insist on proper recognition.

Aware of the partisan hierarchy of command in the CEF and back in England, Currie worried constantly that Turner or another Canadian general waiting in the wings would supplant him.⁸² Beaverbrook had done his best to ensure that his friends would be given the most important command positions, and when Currie had bucked at this influence peddling, most prominently by blocking the appointment of Garnet Hughes to command of the 1st Division, he had suffered a campaign of lies and slander intended to ruin his name.⁸³ Currie could never pin down his enemies, but he believed that Beaverbrook and the Hughes (father and son) were involved. Furthermore, Currie knew that his operational victories from 1917 onward, although garnering the Canadian Corps a reputation as shock troops, had been won at a heavy cost. The casualty lists continued unabated, and Currie needed the historians and publicists to show the full extent of the victories, which would help justify the terrible losses.

The first histories to come out, therefore, had an enormous impact not only on the public but also on the soldiers. As Currie's correspondence made clear, he was aware that his position was insecure, and he therefore could not accept semi-official histories that ignored his men or their acts. There was more, thought Currie and the rest of the Canadian generals, to Beaverbrook's history than the simple scribbles of a political manipulator: he and the CWRO had the power to shape contemporary perceptions and to lay the foundation for future interpretations of the war.⁸⁴ If a man as powerful as Currie took notice, then it is clear that others did too.

Although Currie and the CWRO were able to put aside their differences for the rest of the war, it is perhaps not surprising that Beaverbrook cancelled work on the fourth volume of *Canada in Flanders*. Currie had also learned something from the acrimonious exchange: in late 1918 he established his own historical group, the Canadian War Narrative Section, to write his official account of the fighting rather than turning to the accomplished CWRO chroniclers. Despite having his grievances largely ignored, Currie still remained convinced of the essential work of the CWRO and passed several additional orders to all units in the corps, noting the importance of creating proper war records to document their actions and of sending them later to the CWRO for safe archiving.⁸⁵ In the end, despite the general's dislike for Beaverbrook, the two agreed to work together because they were both consumed with seeing the Canadian Corps receive its due credit. Currie prepared for both the war of No Man's Land and the war of reputations that would follow.

In this wartime struggle for recognition, the CWRO continued in its role of writing supportive Canadian accounts. The Eye Witness reports of 1915 had been replaced, by 1917, with a concentrated barrage of journalistic dispatches emanating from the CWRO that emphasized the unique nature of the Canadian soldier and were aimed at the British and Canadian public on the home front. The result was an effective propaganda program that disseminated short sketches of

Canadian courage throughout the Empire.⁸⁶ For example, the CWRO ran a series of special articles at the end of 1917 “for the benefit of the British Public” in order to emphasize “what a democratic Army Canada possesses.”⁸⁷ This was not a far leap from the enduring militia myth forged after the War of 1812, which provided a convenient set of Canadian heroes and did not require the government to invest in a professional military. The CWRO continued its publicity campaign with the British press in 1918 by sending out pre-written stories to all British newspapers. A similar article by Major T.G. Roberts, which was published in a series of British newspapers, underscored how Canadian boys had been fashioned into a great fighting army: “The prize-fighter may make a good soldier, but the mild young man in the corner book-shop makes a better soldier ... The junior clerk who yesterday trembled before the displeasure of his paunchy employer today dies gloriously for England on the field of battle.” Although Roberts did not detail how or why the civilian made this transition to soldier, the notion of a democratic army was stressed repeatedly in CWRO-disseminated accounts. The idea of the inherently superior civilian soldier who put down pen and plough for rifle to defeat the professional German soldier was in direct contrast with what most British generals, especially Haig and Currie, saw as the key factors in the Canadian operational success from 1917 onward. Instead, it was continuous training and the maintenance of strong discipline in the ranks that had forged the corps’ effectiveness.⁸⁸ With their long-standing and multi-faceted publicity campaign, the CWRO could rightly claim that its work “has done more than a little to increase Canadian prestige and correct still prevalent misconceptions as to Canadian affairs.”⁸⁹ Yet some of the ideas emanating from the CWRO conflicted with reality, while others avoided the real structural and tactical reasons for success in favour of highlighting racial or national characteristics that supposedly animated all Canadian soldiers.

From April 1917 onward, the Canadians won an unbroken series of victories: Vimy Ridge in April, Fresnoy in May, Hill 70 in August, Passchendaele in October-November, and the many battles that made up the last Hundred Days offensives. The Canadians had honed their attack doctrine of close infantry and artillery support and evolved into an elite force within the BEF, and Currie was not shy about claiming that his corps was the “hardest-hitting force” in the “British Empire.”⁹⁰ Nonetheless, due to censorship restrictions, the imperial war journalists were not always able to distinguish between the initiatives of British troops and those of the Canadians and Australians. Many of the successful Dominion operations (the capture of trenches, villages, or what was left of them) had therefore been attributed to British units or the BEF in general. With the Dominion forces now viewing themselves as national armies, Currie was furious at the thought of being cheated out of recognition, and as a result he wrote, “the people in Canada would like to receive the fullest accounts of the doings of the Corps.” That was a diplomatic way of demanding proper recognition for hard-won deeds. To codify the sacrifice,

Canadian Corps intelligence tabulated that during the battles of Amiens and the crashing of the Hindenburg Line in the Hundred Days campaign, a two-month period of fierce fighting, the Corps had captured 21,000 prisoners and 300 guns, and defeated 34 German divisions. During this time the Canadian Corps, with its four over-strength divisions, accounted for more than 25 percent of the prisoners and 40 percent of the guns for the entire BEF. It was necessary for Currie that those at home understood the extent of their corps' contribution in battle. Such figures had to be disseminated in order to strengthen his position against the political intriguers calling for his sacking due to the high casualties suffered in these successful but costly campaigns.⁹¹

Despite both political and military urging by the Canadians, many of the British journalists and press censors continued to believe that there was no need to distinguish between Dominion and British troops.⁹² Against this perceived discrimination, the Canadian Corps was forced to rely heavily on its established publicity machine to propagate its deeds. The CWRO remained the focal point for disseminating information from Canadian war correspondents such as F.A. Mackenzie, J.F.B. Livesay, Rowland Hill, Fred James and its own CWRO staff, whose job it was to "stiffen the war-weary backbone of Canada."⁹³ A conscious effort was made to have Canadian press stories sent to all British newspapers in the hope of combating what staff officers at Canadian General Headquarters (GHQ) viewed as a bias against them.

At the same time, these perceived slights to the Dominion armies were viewed differently within the rest of the BEF, with many imperial divisional commanders complaining that their units were largely ignored in favour of the more easily identifiable Dominion troops.⁹⁴ Despite conflicting and chauvinistic views of the coverage, it is clear that armies fighting in the field were also keenly aware of the battle over shaping and sharpening their own reputations. Without the CWRO, it is likely that the Canadians would not have garnered the same recognition. The notion of the colonial storm trooper, which has since been codified in much of the historical writing over the twentieth century and was based primarily on the success of the Australians and Canadians in the last two years of the war, might very well have been more muted. It was not, with one *Manchester Guardian* reporter noting sarcastically shortly after the Armistice that it was "long open to doubt whether there was anybody but Canadians fighting in France."⁹⁵ Such an observation reflected Canadian operational victories no doubt, but it also reflected Beaverbrook's work in record creation and archiving and the effective exploitation of such documentary resources in producing pro-Canadian publicity in many forums and media.

ON 11 NOVEMBER 1918, James E. Hahn, a staff officer at David Watson's 4th Divisional headquarters, recounted in his memoirs a toast at the time of the Armistice: "At this moment there are men who are fortunate to be on the Honours Lists,

there are men who are fortunate to be on Lists of Decorations; but at this moment how fortunate are we, who are on the list of survivors.”⁹⁶ With more than 60,000 Canadian dead in four years of terrible fighting, most citizen-soldiers had a fervent desire to go home and be reunited with loved ones. Yet it would be several months before demobilization could begin, as armies were ordered to occupy Germany, and the transportation of millions of men required enormously complicated plans. During this time, the CWRO worried that unit war records were in danger of being discarded or lost, as military discipline was perceived as being far more lax.⁹⁷ As they had throughout the war, historical officers therefore went into the field to ensure that records would be properly sent to the CWRO.

The CWRO got what it wished for, but the thousands of records that passed into its control flooded the small staff. Although some preliminary sorting and arrangement was carried out, it was decided that most of the cataloguing would have to be done in Ottawa. In early 1919 the CWRO began planning the transfer of the war records to Canada, which consisted of more than 10,000 boxes (and this did not include the voluminous administrative records relating to pay and personnel held by other record-keeping units). This was done to avoid the possibility of loss or damage, especially in the event those same guardians should be demobilized before the records were loaded on to the ships.⁹⁸ The records would eventually go to the Public Archives as Lord Beaverbrook had promised Doughty, but first they would be used by the army’s official historian to craft his historical series.

While the CWRO was caring for the war records, Doughty had always believed in the totality of archival material. In March 1917, he had written Acting Prime Minister Sir George Foster that he should document all the war records being created in Canada and overseas. Such a survey would be in the “historical interest of Canada”; an order-in-council was passed, giving Doughty a salary and a staff of two: William Wood and Gustave Lanctôt.⁹⁹ All three went overseas in late 1917 to document the war records so that the Public Archives staff would know which series and types of records they would eventually inherit. Despite high hopes, the archives group met with limited success, and most units had little time for these badgering archivists.¹⁰⁰

While the small group failed to achieve its laudable goals, it was able to play an important role in gathering war trophies for the Canadian people. On an informal basis, Doughty worked with British officers to ensure that some of the captured war trophies, all of which were automatically sent to the new Imperial War Museum for selection, were reserved for Canada.¹⁰¹ In December 1918, Doughty was appointed to a Commission on War Records and War Trophies, since he was one of the leading civil servants in the country and an expert on history, heritage, and records. The great collector, just as he had for fifteen years, began to negotiate the release of CEF-captured booty to bring back to Canada, and then to

distribute it across the nation. The committee also returned with a strongly worded document suggesting that a “Canadian War Archives” be built to act as a memorial for all the tangible documents – texts, photographs, art, film, and other material – that represented Canada’s sacrifice in the Great War.¹⁰² Beaverbrook, who had pushed for a similar building to house his war art, hoped to prod the government along and even commissioned an architect to design a building.¹⁰³

In addition to the gathering and archiving of records for the official historian, Canadian War Memorial, or Public Archives, the CWRO continued to highlight the Canadian Corps. The CWRO published a few regimental histories during the war, which were to augment the story told within the *Canada in Flanders* series; another short account of Canadian Victoria Cross winners was distributed after the war. The CWRO also encouraged and assisted in the publication of two histories of the Canadian military effort in the Hundred Days: Fred James’s *Canada’s Triumph* (1918) and J.F.B. Livesay’s *Canada’s Hundred Days* (1919). James and Livesay had been war correspondents. They filed their stories through the CWRO during the war, and they benefited from the assistance of the CWRO.¹⁰⁴ James’s history had been published before the end of the war, and a hasty second edition of several thousand copies, which carried the Canadians up to the capture of Mons on 11 November 1918, “sold out before they could be delivered.”¹⁰⁵ Livesay’s work is the better remembered of the two, but it was written in the same heroic mould of the *Canada in Flanders* series. Despite having had significant contact with the infantry, Livesay felt he could still write that “hot-blooded youth doesn’t care how long the war goes on; it is his great adventure; to him it is a ‘lovely war.’”¹⁰⁶ If Livesay failed to capture the true spirit of the soldiers, he, like Beaverbrook, had written to bring glory to the Canadian Corps and ensure that the nation’s fighting force received full recognition for its deeds. Furthermore, while the Canadians had been elevated to elite soldiers, Sir Arthur Currie, condemned by politicians and even some of his own men, was being derided as a butcher who callously drove the Canadians too hard and sacrificed too many to achieve his goals. *Canada’s Hundred Days* was written to ensure that Currie received fair treatment in the first histories while at the same time buttressing the general’s reputation against the epidemic of rumours that was spreading through the CEF and the home front.¹⁰⁷ It was clear, then, that the war of reputations, both of the Canadian Corps and its commander, had already started early in Canada’s first military histories.

BORDEN AND CURRIE met shortly after the war, and the prime minister informed the general that “certain sections of the American press have adopted the attitude of belittling the importance of operations of the Canadians.” Although Currie supplied Borden with a short narrative on recent operations, it was clear that a full history was needed to defend the reputation of the Canadian Corps.¹⁰⁸ With Currie still smarting from the belief that both the British press and GHQ had downplayed

the success of his corps, an official account based on authentic documents would offer, he believed, just rewards. Equally important, an official report might help to defend against the rumours that were beginning to spread relating to Currie's command in the last year of the war, which had been enormously successful but equally costly to his men.

One of the CWRO reports noted that it was necessary to "secure for Canada those facts of War, which in the dim future may come to be regarded simply as legend or folk-lore unless they are carefully recovered in black and white at the present time and are carefully preserved for all time."¹⁰⁹ Although Currie agreed with the sentiment, he did not want to leave the task of writing the official report of operations to the CWRO. Having lost more than a few battles to Beaverbrook over the nature of the first semi-official CEF history, Currie set up his own historical section to ensure that he had control over how the Hundred Days would be codified in print and presented to the public.

Although there is no indication that Currie interfered with the writing of the history, the corps commander did order one of his most gifted and respected senior officers, Brigadier General Raymond Brutinel, who had been an innovator of machine-gun tactics during the war, to oversee the historical work. "I am very anxious that this report should be very complete and very accurate," wrote Currie, and under Brutinel the Canadian War Narrative Section (CWNS) was established on 20 December 1918.¹¹⁰

Currie ordered all divisional commanders to give full support to the narrators. The cooperation was nearly total, as Currie was clearly anxious to see the work published, but also because any failure to comply might result in units being ignored in the final report.¹¹¹ Currie also ordered that documents be loaned to the CWNS, which must have been worrisome to the members of the CWRO, as this was obviously an overlap of responsibilities. However, with Currie's backing the CWNS had priority in the collection, arrangement, and use of operational records to craft this history.

Brutinel set guidelines, in particular that the CWNS historians should strive for "clearness and accuracy ... [but that] no adverse comment need be made respecting the leadership or conduct of formations or Troops acting in conjunction with the Canadian Corps."¹¹² As we have seen, however, Currie wished to see the Canadian Corps receive its full credit. With a mass of documents at its disposal and even more arriving every day, within three months the CWNS compiled a competent, if dry, history of the Corps in the Hundred Days. The pounding nature of the fighting was highlighted and that helped to explain why almost 20 percent of all Canadian battlefield casualties occurred during these ninety-six days of battle. Having spearheaded the BEF, the four over-strength Canadian divisions met and defeated parts of forty-seven German divisions. While Canadian intelligence officers counted every enemy soldier confronted in battle to reach

this astounding figure, Currie still crowed to one friend that “We took care of 25%” of the total German armies on the Western Front, “leaving it to the American Army, the French Army, the Belgian Army and the rest of the British Army to look after the balance.”¹¹³

The final history was an important document for Currie as Sir Sam Hughes had publicly voiced the long-standing undercurrent of rumours against Currie in the House of Commons in early March 1919. Protected by parliamentary immunity, Hughes accused Currie of “needlessly sacrificing the lives of Canadian soldiers” in order to elevate his own status among the British. Currie should be “tried summarily by court martial and punished so far as the law would allow ... You cannot find one Canadian soldier returning from France who will not curse the name of the officer who ordered that attack on Mons,” lectured Hughes to his fellow members of parliament.¹¹⁴ Currie was deeply hurt by the attack, even more so since there were few politicians who were willing to stand up for him and against the fiery ex-minister. Without accurate reports, however, many of Currie’s friends in parliament had been hamstrung in their ability to rebut Hughes’s wild claims. Although the corps commander was eventually defended by Cy Peck, a newly elected MP, former battalion commander, and Victoria Cross winner, no minister rose in defence.¹¹⁵ Borden, to whom Currie had offered key advice during the war on how to deal with his British political counterparts, refused to engage Hughes until months later, and even then he never effectively refuted the claim that Currie had needlessly killed Canadian soldiers. The CWNS report, then, was an important first step for Currie in reclaiming his damaged reputation from Hughes, his cabal, and the Canadian soldiers, many of whom both believed and added to the rumours.¹¹⁶

The CWNS history was also a concern to Currie’s divisional commanders. Major General David Watson of the 4th Division wrote to Currie in early February that he wished to read a draft before it was published to ensure that his division received a fair accounting. “I have no objection whatever to your seeing this narrative,” wrote Currie, “in fact I would like you to see it, because I am very anxious that it should not only be complete but accurate; but to intimate that, under the arrangements now pertaining, justice would not be done to your Division, is to insinuate something which I don’t like.” Currie finished somewhat menacingly by indicating that Watson should have “confidence in my ability to do justice to the operations of the Fourth Division.”¹¹⁷ It appeared that Currie, while demanding full glory for the Canadian Corps, would be the final arbiter for ensuring the accuracy and fullness of those first accounts, which laid the groundwork for conceptualizing the conflict.

Currie also paid close attention to what other historians were writing about his corps. When *The Final Blow of the First Army in 1918* was published that same month, Currie had the unenviable task of complaining to his old Army commander,

General Sir Henry Horne, that the accomplishments of the Canadian Corps had been largely ignored in this history. Just as during the war, when the British press downplayed or referred mistakenly to Canadian battles as British ones, “it seems as if the author was reluctant to refer to the Canadians at any time,” wrote Currie. No mention was made of the hard fighting on 30-31 August against the Fresnes-Rouvroy line, and no credit was given to the 1st and 4th Divisions’ monumental crashing of the Canal du Nord on 27 September. Currie once again showed his desire to have his corps recognized.¹¹⁸ Horne wrote back to Currie a week later, downplaying the problems of the monograph by noting that it was not an “official history,” but indicating that he regretted the Canadians had been ignored.¹¹⁹ In an often-quoted and decontextualized remark that was originally made in private, however, Horne complained that, “the Canadian Corps is perhaps rather apt to take all the credit it can for everything, and to consider that the BEF consists of the Canadian Corps and some other troops.”¹²⁰ To the British, the Canadians again appeared bent on self-promotion; to the Canadians, it confirmed that they would have to be vigilant in securing proper recognition for their deeds.

Having finished the narrative on the Hundred Days, the CWNS was demobilized back to Canada. Along with twelve tons of records, the CWNS historians found, on arrival in Ottawa, that no preparation had been made for their establishment, and they were temporarily stationed in an old garage. Equally troubling was the confusion over who was responsible for the CEF’s records. Would it be the CWNS or the CWRO? A third organization was also in competition for the records, since the Department of Militia and Defence had appointed Brigadier General E.A. Cruikshank, a soldier with a distinguished military and historical career, as the war’s official historian in mid-1917.¹²¹

Official historians had been established over a decade earlier in the British army. The British Committee for Imperial Defence had been organized in 1904 to reform the British Army, and as a result it developed a small historical section to educate staff officers and create practical “lessons learned” monographs for future soldiers.¹²² The military reforms required after the South African War (1899-1902) proved that an army could only improve and evolve if it understood its past operations. From the start, then, official histories had an operational role. Interestingly, though, while a British official history of the South African War was begun in 1907, the Canadian government had planned as far back as 1899 to have an official history written of the Canadian participation. Those plans ultimately failed, however, when the historian, F.J. Dixon, decided to stay in South Africa instead of returning to Canada.¹²³ But now, eighteen years later, Canada had its first official historian. Would he simply follow the general staff precedent and craft a history primarily for the military profession to understand the nature of warfare? The decision was put off until the records arrived from overseas in mid-1919.

But who would use the records to write an official account of the war, now that there were three historical sections? General Brutinel had his own opinions, and he informed Currie that he hoped that his CWNS could be kept together to author a full history of the war, as it “would be of very great importance to Canada,” and he did not think that Cruikshank could finish such a history due to his advanced age.¹²⁴ Brutinel also suggested that Brigadier General J.H. MacBrien might write the official history, but MacBrien would set his sights a little higher, becoming the chief of staff. That MacBrien had no training as an historian seemed not to worry Brutinel, who also had none. As official historian, however, Cruikshank was always an outsider since he had not served overseas during the war. But he did have the backing of the department. The CWRO was disbanded first, especially since Beaverbrook, its powerful patron, remained in London. In 1920 the CWNS was combined with the Army Historical Section, and Major A.F. Duguid, a researcher for the CWNS, became chief assistant to Cruikshank. A year later, Duguid would be elevated to the position of official historian, and tasked with the writing of Canada’s Great War effort.

ONE EARLY REVIEWER of *Canada in Flanders* observed that the book “lifts the veil of war and tells us not only what our heroes did, but who they were.”¹²⁵ Beaverbrook and the CWRO may have revealed an aspect of the war that was previously unavailable to the public, but their unveiling was not a disinterested act: while pulling away the curtain, they had their own agenda to present. Not everyone liked Beaverbrook or his work: one Canadian staff officer categorized his writing as “products of hearsay and collaboration, these spurious masterpieces of an incompetent absentee.”¹²⁶ Currie was not much kinder, describing the historical series as bearing “no more resemblance to the true story of the period it depicts than a mutton stew does to the sheep itself.”¹²⁷ Beaverbrook was well aware of the pitfalls of writing contemporary history, warning that his history was based on records “snatched from the firing line, and what they gained in vividness, they may have lost in accuracy. It is for the historian of the future to decide.”¹²⁸ Future historians would indeed clear up mistakes that were made because of a lack of time to consider or even locate evidence. Until then, though, several generations would rely heavily on the first histories produced or supported by the CWRO, and all historians are in debt to Beaverbrook and his staff for their work in collecting and shaping the war archives of the CEF.

Beaverbrook had his enemies, as all powerful men do, but it was his important role in the initial chaotic Canadian administrative hierarchy and his close friendship with Sir Sam Hughes that allowed him to exert considerable power, as no historian or archivist would have been able to in the same situation. Beaverbrook was also one of the premier propagandists of the war. “This strange attractive gnome

with an odour of genius about him,” was little liked and much feared; more than a few called him “Beenacrook,” but they did so behind his back.¹²⁹ And although he was distrusted by all three Canadian Corps commanders in the field, both Byng and Currie came to recognize the important work of the CWRO in not only preserving their legacy through the archiving of war records, but also in publicizing the deeds of the Canadian soldier at the sharp end.

Our understanding of the past is always changing, ever nuanced, and always reinterpreted by subsequent generations. Despite Beaverbrook’s impressive work, he was practical enough to realize that his histories were but the first of many to follow. Nevertheless, with the actual sources at his fingertips, Beaverbrook and the CWRO were able to “steal a march” on other chroniclers and present their version of the war and the role of the Canadians in it. Beaverbrook wrote with a purpose in mind – to glorify the deeds of the Canadians. And he did so with a flare and style that made his histories bestsellers. Along with his CWRO officers and their vast output during the war, Beaverbrook constructed an image of the Canadian soldier reflecting his own ideals. Canadians were depicted as a northern race of rugged civilian-soldiers who were separate from their British cousins. This image was embraced because it was consistent with British prewar views of the Canadian frontier and the men who tamed it. Yet there was more to it than that. Beaverbrook’s writing built on these myths and the CWRO’s primary goal, despite the medium used, was a steady barrage of propaganda to distinguish the Canadians within the wider context of the BEF. Beaverbrook laid the groundwork for collecting the war records, and then he used those same records to fashion the first depictions of the war, to present the Canadian soldier in a superior light, buttressed with seemingly authentic official records.

The archival records, then, remained an essential component in supporting the publicity function of the CWRO, and later underpinned all subsequent interpretations of the Great War. It is also clear, however, that archives are not just the bare bones of history for future generations; they are part of the history-making process. Archives are not neutral, nor are their creation impartial.¹³⁰ There is always a mandate to collect something, to privilege some voices while silencing others. Such was the case with the CWRO intent on documenting Canadian actions that glorified the heroics of battle over the futility of trench warfare, and emphasized the success of the democratic citizen in defeating the professional German military machine. These records eventually helped to form the official archives that subsequent generations of historians have used to formulate their views of the Canadian Corps. The notion of an objective archival record, collected in a disinterested fashion, is problematic. It is nearly impossible to gauge the influence of the CWRO officers on the war diarists and other creators of war records, but it is clear from the CWRO officers’ reports back to London that their prime mandate was to ensure that records were created to document actions. That alone suggests that it

was not simply the soldiers at the front who wrote up their daily accounts. They were influenced by regulations, orders, time constraints, and the inability to know what was happening along the front, not to mention the constant prodding by CWRO staff who visited the battalions to inquire into and influence the record-keeping process. There is no evidence to suggest that Canadian records were fabricated to cover up disasters in the war – as disasters, along with the victories, are plainly evident in the war archives. However, one should be cautioned by the anecdote offered by Sir Basil Liddell Hart, who recounted the story of a French general. During the desperate March Offensive, French reinforcements were ordered to counterattack. It was found, however, that the line had already been lost the day before. Upon being informed of the loss, the general refused to destroy the order, and “with a knowing smile, thereupon remarked: ‘*C’est pour l’histoire.*’” Much time was spent during the war, warned Liddell Hart, in “preparing the ground for its historians.”¹³¹ With the CWRO’s involvement and the various factors affecting the creation of Canadian war records, these primary documents are products more of process and influence than accurate and disinterested mirrors of acts and facts.

Whatever the operational successes of the Canadian Corps on the Western Front from 1917 onward – and there was an unbroken run – one must at least acknowledge that a portion of the Canadian reputation as shock troops came from the CWRO’s publicity campaign. Beaverbrook’s desire to nurture a Canadian image separate from that of his British counterparts, when coupled with the Canadian Corps’ operational successes, helped to forge a distinct Canadian identity as elite troops. As the sole agency of publicity in the CEF, the CWRO developed a steady deluge of stories, photos, exhibitions, films, commemorative works, and histories to ensure that Canada received its full credit. It is always difficult to estimate the impact of publicity campaigns, but anecdotal evidence suggests the CWRO made an impression. British war correspondent Philip Gibbs commended Beaverbrook in his 1920 memoirs, writing that the Canadians “organized their publicity” in a “masterful way, and were determined that what Canada did the world should know – and damn all censorship.”¹³² Attesting to that same publicity campaign, John Buchan, the director of Britain’s Department of Information, famous novelist, and future Canadian governor general, certainly saw the results of this “human dynamo’s” work. He observed somewhat incredulously that the wide circulation of CWRO books and pamphlets, as well as photographs and film, might lead one to believe “that Canada is running the war.”¹³³

Beaverbrook wisely noted in the preface to the second volume of the *Canada in Flanders* series that the gathering of the war records allowed for the “framework [to be] erected for an official narrative. This is a prudent measure which will be endorsed by Canadian students of history, since there is a growing tendency to demand a full and intelligent documentary record of our progress.” Soldiers were often forced to create records in “the face of grave danger and complete exhaustion,

when they might well have been excused from troubling about such trivialities as to what posterity would think of them.”¹³⁴ But posterity would be very interested in these Great War heroes, and countless historians would study them over the next century. These same historians would rely heavily on the war records. The conscious moulding of memory and laying of an historical foundation by Lord Beaverbrook has had an enduring legacy in Canadian historiography since the guns fell silent on 11 November 1918.