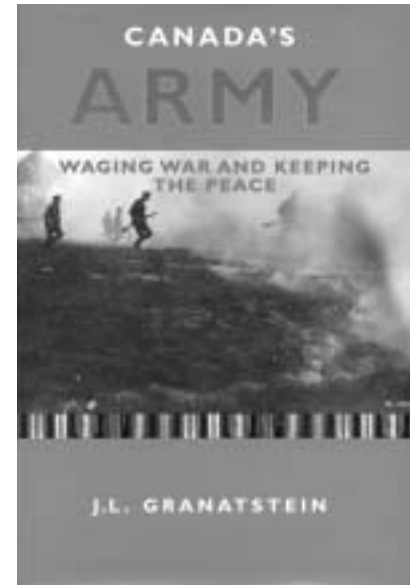


The Hard-Won Lessons of Canada at War: A History of Professionalism and Neglect

J.L. Granatstein, *Canada's Army: Waging War in a Time of Peace*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002.

Review by Dan W. Middlemiss



Canada has been blessed with a tradition of excellent military historians and, with his latest work, *Canada's Army: Waging War and Keeping the Peace*, Jack Granatstein has surely solidified his place among this august pantheon. As those who are familiar with his prolific writings will already know, Granatstein is passionate on the subject of Canadian history and on the centrality of our nation's military experiences to this history and to the shaping of our national identity. In a sense, we are Canadian not only *because* we contribute, but also by virtue of *what* we contribute to defence.

In this lively, at times almost rollicking, account of the role of Canada's army in both peace and war, Granatstein seeks to dispel the "militia myth"—the unsubstantiated notion that "professional soldiers are not necessary so long as the people, organized into a militia, received the minimal training required to protect the country." Instead, his purpose is to demonstrate the need for a well-trained, properly equipped and adequately funded "professional" army, and to offer, as he puts it, "constructive criticism" of the policies that throughout history have

hampered the achievement of this vital goal. Here, the discerning reader will undoubtedly detect the strand of activism that has characterized Granatstein's recent crusades on behalf of a revitalized Canadian War Museum and his key role in publicizing the message of military renewal espoused by the Council for Canadian Security in the 21st Century.

Granatstein concedes that in Canada's formative years, beginning with the War of 1812 and continuing until World War I, there were "elements of truth" to this myth. But he argues that Canada muddled through its early conflicts and survived more by good luck and the disarray of her enemies than through the military competence of her militias.

This volume is not about the glorification of war or some misguided martial spirit; rather, its focus is the increasingly obvious disconnect between Canadians near-universal desire to be active participants and the persistent neglect of those troops we so often and negligently call upon to act on our behalf.

His account of the makings of Canada's professional army during the horrendous carnage of the two world wars constitutes the gripping core of this masterly volume. Granatstein displays a deft, flowing and always authoritative touch as he guides the reader through the planning and implementation phases of the great battles of these two conflicts.

Almost effortlessly, he is able to convey simultaneously both the role of Canadian officers, some excellent but many found wanting in the skills of planning and leadership, at the highest strategic levels of campaigning, and, through evocative vignettes, the pain, suffering and occasional heroism of the individual men and women of the newly developing permanent force as they sought to carry

out the sometimes ill-conceived orders of their superiors.

Throughout the book, Granatstein outlines his concept of a “professional” army, yet he manages to do so in a lucid, often witty and non-didactic manner that should appeal to non-specialist readers and academics alike. His message is both clear and compelling: it takes continuous education and realistic training of officers and soldiers to enable them to develop appropriate, flexible tactics to employ rapidly evolving military technology to the best advantage under the always demanding and ever-changing conditions of combat. And all of this takes money, something which successive Canadian governments have always been loath to provide the military.

But when all, or at least most, of these prerequisites of professionalism are met, the Canadian army has proved to be a remarkably effective force. Canadians have learned: the techniques of proper battlefield preparation through extensive training exercises, creeping barrages and accurate and disciplined counter-battery fire; the necessity of secure logistics and

Granatstein observes that the army today is on the verge of professional collapse from the same litany of factors that in the past have left it unprepared for extended action.

communications; and the morale-enhancing benefit of immediate, high-quality medical care for the wounded. These and others are the hard-won lessons of Canada’s major conflicts, and Granatstein provides convincing evidence that these have, indeed, been learned on the job. But the cost of this makeshift approach is always high, and Granatstein believes strongly that a professional military is better perceived as an insurance policy where timely payment in advance means less cost later in lives and resources.

But, as Granatstein points out in his broad-brush chapters covering the post-World War II period, it has all too

often been the case that Canadians and their governments unfailingly under-value their military in times of peace. There is an almost melancholy, and sometimes scathingly bitter, tone to Granatstein’s recital of the many manifestations of the marked deterioration of military professionalism throughout this entire period.

Canada’s sweepingly intemperate de mobilization after the war left the country once again unprepared for the Korean “police action.” But Canadians performed well once they were hastily assembled and dispatched. Canada sent a small but highly respected professional contingent to serve in Europe as part of our NATO commitment, but this expertise was steadily eroded through a series of defence budget cuts. A changing strategic environment, the controversy over nuclear weapons, and the trauma of unification all contributed their share to the army’s malaise.

Peacekeeping seemed to be a distinctively Canadian role, and our troops performed it well throughout the Cold War era and after. But the scandals of Somalia brought even this

role into disrepute, and reflected a military that was increasingly dispirited and over-committed given the resources provided. Granatstein observes that the army today is on the verge of professional collapse from the same litany of factors that in the past have left it unprepared for extended action.

What is Granatstein’s explanation for this perennial state of affairs? Elsewhere, he has called this the “Peter Pan Syndrome”—the refusal of Canadians to grow up and accept responsibility for their own defence. This attitude has been fostered in part by the illusion of geographical isolation and in



J.L. GRANATSTEIN

UTP

part by the legacy of a colonial mindset of psychological dependence on a series of patron states —France, Britain and now the United States.

This is an important work, and it deserves to be studied by those who ponder the proper relationship between the Canadian military and the society it serves. This volume is not about the glorification of war or some misguided martial spirit; rather, its focus is the increasingly obvious disconnect between Canadians near-universal desire—and need—to be active participants in resolving conflicts abroad and to be able to respond to crises at home, and the persistent neglect of those troops we so often and negligently call upon to act on our behalf.

What are the policy choices here? Granatstein adamantly concludes that this pattern of neglect is a disservice not only to the army, which must suffer from undue risk and burn-out, but also to ourselves as a nation, because in ignoring the requirements of a professional military we lose credibility and respect and, perhaps most importantly, our capacity to act as a sovereign, independent state.

Dan W. Middlemiss is a professor of political science at Dalhousie University in Halifax.