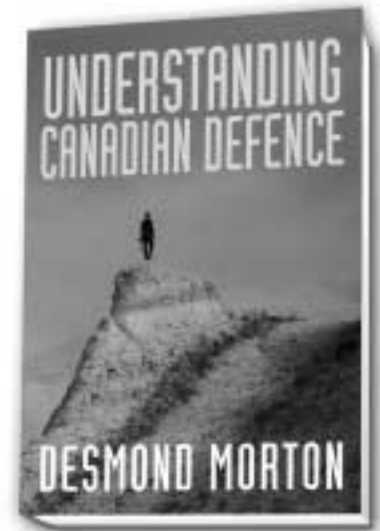


Canadian defence at a crossroads — defining future missions and means

Desmond Morton, *Understanding Canadian Defence*. Toronto and Montreal: Penguin Canada and the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada, 2003.

Review by Geoffrey Kelley



Over the past few years, the question of the role given to Canada's armed forces has been raised with vigour and some urgency. Often in the wake of a tragic incident where equipment failure, morale failure, or discipline failure has provided waves of critical headlines in the press and angry questions in the House of Commons, Canadians have been called upon to reinvest in our military and to honour our defence commitments to our allies.

In a country where hand-wringing is a national pastime, these calls are often guilt-laden examinations of Canada's failure to play its role in the world. Andrew Cohen's *While Canada Slept: How We Lost Our Place in the World* is a recent example of this genre, a call to rearmament in order to be "a good ally and a good citizen of the world."

But before our defence policy-makers accept Cohen's conclusion that the military budget should be increased to \$20 billion (up 67 per cent), they would be well-advised to read Desmond Morton's latest reflection on our military and its history. *Understanding Canadian Defence*, published by the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada, which Professor

Morton headed for many years, is a useful study of the main threads of Canadian military history and policy.

Morton takes as his starting point an observation made by Joel Sokolsky, a political scientist at The Royal Military College, who noted "Canada's defence problem is that it has no defence problem." How do we design a defence policy for a country surrounded by lots of geography and nestled beside the greatest superpower on the globe? Given that defence policy is often conceived in response to real or imagined threats, what exactly do Canadians have to worry about?

He then outlines the main themes of our military history, from New France and its native alliance down through the skirmishes over the border in the 19th century to the two world wars, the Cold War, and the uneasy peace of the last decade. Morton makes it clear that our strategies have always had to fit into the considerations of larger and more powerful allies or imperial masters. There is not much new in the modern buzzword of "interoperability" of our armed forces with our American neighbours: the same challenge faced General Montcalm and Governor Vaudreuil, Sir Isaac Brock

and the local militias in 1812, and Canadian soldiers serving in the world wars of the twentieth century.

At the end of the Cold War, many Western democracies were told that they could look forward to a "peace dividend," as the New World Order would be easier to police. Sadly, this forecast was wrong, as it neglected ethnic and regional tensions unleashed after the Cold War ended. From the Balkans to the ethnic warfare in Africa, and from the troubled Middle East to the new war on terrorism, the world remains an unsafe place.

In this new context, Morton indicates how it has become more difficult to perform peacekeeping missions, a cherished element of Canada's military past. Stemming from vigorous peace movements that have emerged at various times in our history, Morton cautions that "no one trying to understand defence policy in Canada can ignore the organizing potential of a peace movement based on innocence, righteousness and Canada's remarkably long immunity from danger."

Morton then looks at one area where reinvestment is clearly needed — the working conditions of our



McGill Institute for the Study of Canada

Desmond Morton: An eminent historian asks “What is Canada’s place in the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA)?”

armed forces. Casting the debate in terms of life cycles, Morton shows that our military equipment purchased to honour Cold War NATO commitments must be renewed. We must replace our “obsolete helicopters, worn-out guns, and rusted-out warships.”

But he puts on equal footing the challenge of recruiting, training, and retaining members in our armed forces. The challenges of reconciling life in the military with family obligations, the difficulties in securing a second income for spouses in military communities, and the maintenance of

military tradition and discipline in our modern world are examined.

On the last point, Morton is categorical: civilians expect infallible discipline as a core assumption in a democracy.

The survey of our military’s past is the strength of this book — not surprising, given that the author is one of Canada’s most distinguished historians. As a result, the final chapter, “Futures,” is somewhat disappointing, as Morton hides behind a fear of forecasting. Given the rapidly changing

and unpredictable events of the past 15 years, this fear is well-founded. However, it is often been stated that the world will never be the same after September 11. One could have expected Morton to examine this question more carefully. He does include an anecdote regarding the NORAD headquarters that morning, where the Canadian officer on duty had to improvise a new policy. NORAD was designed to protect North America from outside threats, not threats arising from within our airspace. New procedures were developed on the spot.

He also includes a brief discussion of the new, high-tech way of waging war. The success of Desert Storm in 1991 and the campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq since 9/11 are entered as evidence that the way of the future lies in investing in the latest gadgetry produced by the weapons industry. Morton invites us to take a long critical look at the claims of the wizards of the new warfare. As both the campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq have shown, winning the peace has been far more elusive than winning the war.

The discussion of our defence challenges in the 21st century reaches few conclusions. Morton closes by saying “if you have read this far, your understanding of some major Canadian defence issues has taken a big step forward. If the choices now look more complex than they did, welcome to reality.” The reader deserves more than this. Professor Morton is a child of army parents, he served in a Canadian military uniform for eleven years and is a seasoned observer of the Canadian political scene. He could have offered more specific guidance to policy-makers about how to reinvest in our military to prepare it for its work in the future.

Morton fails to provide many specifics. However, he has laid out the key questions that must be addressed, and he has reminded us that we are building on a secure foundation.

Geoffrey Kelley is a Liberal member of the Quebec National Assembly and holds an MA in history from McGill University.