More Fighting for Canada: Five Battles, 1760-1944

Reviewed by Major James D. McKillip

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More Fighting for Canada is the second collection of essays edited by Donald Graves. The book, published by Robin Brass, is aptly named because of its unapologetic focus on the tactical level of war, the actual fighting of battles. In a more or less direct challenge to the critics of the so-called "trumpet and drum" writing of history, Graves has set out his agenda very clearly. This is not soft social history; smoke fills the pages.

As in the original Fighting for Canada, Graves has selected a group of essays that cover a wide span Canadian military history. Beginning with the Battle of Sillery during the British conquest of New France, the five essays cover most of the key periods of major Canadian military activity. Also included are studies of Cut Knife Hill during the 1885 North West Rebellion, Paardeberg from the Boer War, the little-known 1918 battle of Iwuy during the First World War, and the Melfa Crossing from the Italian campaign during the Second World War.

All of these studies are tied together and given context through introductory sketches written by the editor. These reinforce the overall theme of the work and do an excellent job of reminding the reader of what that focus is. The book makes wide use of diagrams, drawings, paintings and photographs, some of which have not been published before. The maps, all drawn by Christopher Johnson, are first rate, and provide good support to the associated text.

In the first essay, Ian McCulloch makes the bold claim that the Battle of Sillery, not the more famous Battle of the Plains of Abraham, was the most significant action during the British assault on New France. This claim rests on the author's assertion that the battle was "a bloodier, more bravely and skillfully-fought action than that of 13 September 1759." While this assessment may not convince everyone, especially since a rather strong pro-French bias emerges from the text of this essay, the author does an excellent job of describing the men and weapons associated with the battle. More importantly, the author has done a thorough and meticulous job of piecing together the sequence of events of the action itself. This is the very stuff of tactical writing and is the greatest strength of the book as a whole. Ironically, given the book's overall focus on the tactical level of war, the strategically minded reader is likely to interpret the results of the battle as strong support to the notion of the supremacy of strategy over tactics. The contrast between the British being able to march out of their fortress, lose a battle and still win the war lies in sharp relief to the well-known consequences of the French decision to give battle on the Plains of Abraham.

Part of Robert Caldwell's sub-title to his study of the 1885 Battle of Cut Knife Hill describes the work as "an inquiry into the events that occurred..." and this is precisely what he delivers. In what is probably the strongest, and longest, of the essays in More Fighting for Canada, Caldwell has painstakingly reconstructed the events of the battle and of the key events that led up to and followed it. He does not get drawn into the trap of telling us everything he knows, but concentrates on telling us what we need to know. This is just as well, because it is clear that the author has spent a great deal of time getting to know both the documentary evidence and the ground associated with this action. Although no longer considered as fashionable in historical writing as it once was, Caldwell makes generous use of long direct quotations to support his narrative. This is very effective, especially since the author has spent a great deal of effort describing the battle from both the Canadian Militia and the Cree/Métis perspectives. Those unfamiliar with the 1885 campaign will probably be surprised by the scale and
The intensity of fighting as described by Caldwell. The text is supported by fine maps and diagrams that assist in explaining the battle, and the author has made generous use of previously unpublished photographs. This inquiry is essential reading for students of this period.

The piece on Paardeberg by Brian Reid is perhaps the most frustrating of the five essays in this book. While Reid also does a good job of reconstructing the sequence of events of the battle, the text is somewhat marred by annoying errors of fact. For example, although Reid claims that the British, unlike the Boers, did not establish range markers for controlling their fire, this was a standard technique used rather famously, if not altogether successfully, at the Battle of Isandlwana two decades previously, and in the same African theatre of operations. Reid also suggests that the Boers were armed with a rifle that was superior to that carried by the British. While gun enthusiasts may prefer one of the rifles over the other, the ballistic and technical performance of these weapons was, for all practical purposes, identical. Furthermore, having introduced the notion of superior weaponry, there is no discussion in the ensuing pages of where this might have made a difference in the battle. Still, Reid does probably the best job of bringing the 'feel' of the action into these studies. The taste of sweat joins the smell of smoke in this work.

Mike McNorgan’s analysis of the 1918 Battle of Iwuy is one of the most interesting and original of the essays in More Fighting for Canada by virtue of the fact that almost no one has ever heard of the action. Combining elements of all-arms fighting, the last Canadian cavalry charge, and the only engagement of Canadian troops with German tanks during the First World War, this is a singularly well-chosen battle study. In addition to a thorough reconstruction of the action from the Canadian perspective, McNorgan has done an impressive job of describing the events on the “other side of the hill” – the activities of the Germans. The technical drawings and organizational diagrams associated with this piece are well chosen to support the text and are not just extraneous ornamentation of the pages. This is a compelling read.

The final offering in More Fighting for Canada is John Grodzinski’s study of the Battle of the Melfa Crossing during the Italian campaign in the Second World War. Although the author might fairly be accused of writing Regimental history here – there’s more than a little glory for the Lord Strathcona’s Horse – Grodzinski has also done a good job of describing the battle in a coherent way. Although not as successful in integrating the German side of the battle as McNorgan, the author has still made an effort to include it. A great deal of effort has been put into describing the doctrine and organization of the Canadian Army and, while not always particularly relevant to the battle analysis at hand, it will no doubt please those looking for detail. This study also fits very well within the tactical model laid out by Donald Graves for the book as a whole.

Noticeably absent from this book is any study by Donald Graves himself. This is unfortunate for two reasons. First of all, Graves’ essay in the original Fighting for Canada was probably the strongest offering in that volume, and an essay by him would almost certainly have strengthened this collection. It is also unfortunate because Graves’ reputation as the pre-eminent Canadian historian of the War of 1812 is part of what draws potential readers to this book. The lack of any study from that conflict only serves to drive home the point. Hopefully the editor’s editor will force Graves back into the pages of the next volume.

Which brings us to the second reason why More Fighting for Canada is so aptly named. The two volumes in this series hold a key place in contemporary Canadian military historiography. Indeed they are probably unique in their unabashed focus on the battlefield in the wake of the many years of criticism by social history advocates. These books have a central role in the fight for contemporary Canadian historical writing of battle studies. It can only be hoped that a third volume is already in the works.

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