



## *The Embattled General: Sir Richard Turner and the First World War*

by William F. Stewart.

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Most Canadian military biographies of First World War figures have concerned two men: Sir Arthur Currie, subject of four biographies, and Sam Hughes, subject of three. Sir Richard Turner, though he fought throughout the whole war and held more senior positions than Currie, has received scant attention, apart from sporadic journal articles or chapters in anthologies. William Stewart now addresses this oversight with the first substantial study of Turner's wartime career. He aims to provide a more thorough account of the challenges and responsibilities Turner faced. Although *The Embattled General* will be instructive for all historians and general readers interested in First World War leadership and politics, Stewart envisions specifically a Canadian audience with some awareness of the debate over leadership in the Canadian Corps.

Though a nonacademic by profession, Stewart has earlier written a groundbreaking "learning curve" study of "Attack Doctrine in the Canadian Corps, 1916-1918" and a number of articles on Turner's leadership in Canadian academic journals. The present book is a revision of his doctoral dissertation (Birmingham, 2012), supervised by noted British military historian Gary Sheffield.

The book starts with a cursory overview of Turner's family life and childhood before going on to his time as a young officer during the Boer War, where he won a Victoria Cross and his

long duty as a senior regimental officer developed his management skills and facility in motivating and leading officers and men, his understanding of minor tactics, and his experience in administration at the regimental level. His four-year command of a cavalry brigade exposed him to some of the issues of commanding higher formations. What he lacked was staff training—even an appreciation of the necessity for trained staff officers—and a thorough understanding of contemporary infantry tactics. His later performance needs to be considered against this background. (38)

Stewart often returns to this theme of an amateur soldier who succeeded without much professional training: Turner was intelligent and highly motivated, but had to learn a great deal by trial and error during his rise to the rank of lieutenant general.

The following chapters track major developments in Turner's First World War career; the last chapter outlines his postwar work and private life. Armies being intensely hierarchical institutions, the quality of commanders is crucial, particularly on the battlefield. While the existing scholarly literature casts Turner as a middling administrator found wanting in combat, Stewart maintains this judgment is too harsh and that he was, in fact, an effective commander and administrator.

The author painstakingly assesses Turner's decisions within the war's larger context. He observes that

Turner's first battle [Second Ypres] was not a success. Poor Staff work, inaccurate information transmission, and a dangerous decision indicated that he was overstretched. Turner faced an unprecedented

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1. His master's thesis (New Brunswick, 1982).

challenge in reacting to the effective annihilation of two divisions on his left flank by a new, devastating Secret Weapon. His initial decisions were appropriate for the situation, but his and his brigade staff's performance deteriorated over the course of the battle. (71)

Taking the reader step by step through the battles and training of 1915–16, Stewart fairly identifies Turner's strength and weaknesses, in the end ranking him as a competent commander of troops who would have succeeded as a Corps commander, had he been given that position instead of Currie. This conclusion and others in subsequent chapters are persuasive.

The second half of the book concerns Turner's abilities as an administrator, when he navigated the political minefield in 1917–18 as Chief of the General Staff, Overseas Military Forces of Canada: "Turner, more than Currie, appreciated that the rough and tumble and necessary compromises of party politics, however distasteful to the military mind, were an inextricable feature of an army subordinated to a civilian government" (273). In short, he was a gifted, even indispensable, administrator.

In chapter 7, Stewart examines in detail the "Turner-Currie Dynamic." He demonstrates that Currie misunderstood and mistrusted Turner, but that "what was remarkable was the degree of forbearance Turner demonstrated in the face of constant provocation. Currie certainly fought the administration, but the administration did not fight Currie" (238). This section of the book, though well written and argued, is short on evidence. This deficiency is not entirely made good in the book's conclusion, where four paragraphs compare the two men both as battlefield generals and as administrators.

Stewart has tapped a broad range of primary resources in Canadian and British national archives and in collections at universities in both countries, as well as many personal papers of his dramatic personae. He also fully controls the relevant secondary sources. One small weakness is his neglect to set his study in the context of recent work on Turner and Canadian military leadership.<sup>2</sup>

William Stewart improves and corrects our understanding of Great War military leadership by highlighting a largely unsung leader in the Canadian Corps. He disposes of the myth that Sir Richard Turner was wanting as a senior officer, instead revealing him as a fascinating individual in his own right, not just as Currie's foil. *The Embattled General* is a pleasure to read and will enlighten anyone interested in Canadian military leadership or the Canadian Corps as a whole.

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2. E.g., Patrick Brennan and Thomas Leppard, "How the Lessons Were Learned: Senior Commanders and the Moulding of the Canadian Corps after the Somme," in Yves Tremblay, ed., *Canadian Military History since the 17th Century* (Ottawa: Nat'l Defense, 2001) 135–43, and Andrew Godefroy, ed., *Great War Commands: Historical Perspectives on Canadian Army Leadership 1914–1918* (Kingston: Canadian Defence Acad Pr, 2010).