



John Rickard. The Politics of Command: Lieutenant-General A.G.L. McNaughton and the Canadian Army, 1939-1943. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2010.

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The Flame warfare in which [Lt. Gen Andrew McNaughton] gave [Sir Donald] Banks such 'foresighted assistance,' is nothing to the flame warfare that the unfortunate General is involved in here at the moment.¹

¹ Sir Patrick Duff, Permanent Secretary in the Office of Works to Dominion's Office Permanent Secretary Sir Eric Machtig in November 1943 The National Archives, DO 35/1210.

Permanent Secretary in the British Office of Works Sir Patrick Duff, though with tongue firmly in check, had it right: in November of 1943, Andrew McNaughton, Canada's soldier-scientist army commander was fighting for his professional life in a two front war and his enemies were well-coordinated. In one ear, Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King had his minister of national defence, J.L. Ralston, telling him that "Andy" had to go. He was tired, out of touch, affected by the loss of his son, and unduly committed to keeping the Canadian army unified. In the other, Chief of the Imperial General Staff Sir Alan Brooke whispered that McNaughton was a poor trainer, and unfit for command in the field. The writing was on the wall.

Ascertaining why McNaughton was fired before he had the chance to lead the army that he built into battle, and why a conspiracy developed to bring about his dismissal, have been questions garnering a great deal of discussion among Canadian historians. The latest contribution to the debate is Captain John Rickard's monograph, *The Politics of Command: Lieutenant-General A.G.L. McNaughton and the Canadian Army, 1939-1943*. Rickard's objective is to revisit the explanations historians have given for McNaughton's "resignation" and provide a more careful, nuanced analysis. With the benefit of distance that was not available to either Official Historian (and friend of McNaughton) C.P. Stacey, or to John Sweetenham in his two-volume biography (1968), and with the benefit of space not offered by J.L. Granatstein's lone chapter on McNaughton in *The Generals* (1993), Rickard convincingly accomplishes his task. Without apologizing for McNaughton, Rickard manages to offer a more sympathetic analysis of his capabilities as a commander and the reasons for his dismissal.

Rickard is an officer with the Lord Strathcona's Horse (Royal Canadians). He earned his PhD from the University of New Brunswick in 2006, and *The Politics of Command* stemmed from his dissertation. To his credit, the book has all the advantages of a dissertation but without the pitfalls. He conducted very thorough research in Canadian, British and American archives, and decided from the start to make up his own mind about McNaughton's performance, rather than letting the opinions of Brooke and Commander-in-Chief Home Forces Sir Bernard Paget guide his narrative as other historians have been prone to do. And yet Rickard's book does not read like a standard dissertation; it isn't overly repetitive or excessively dry. Quite the contrary, it is fluid and incisive - an enjoyable read.

Following McNaughton's career chronologically, Rickard re-evaluates the three main reasons historians have given for the general's dismissal: (1) that he refused to permit the division of the Canadian army, wanting it to remain a "dagger pointed at the heart of Berlin" even at the expense of experience and morale; (2) that he was an inadequate trainer and deficient commander, a perception based on the failure of command during Exercise SPARTAN in March 1943; and (3) that he had character defects which led him to feud with Ralston, Brooke, Paget, Kenneth Stuart, Bernard Montgomery, etc. Rickard successfully contends that although all three arguments have merit, they overly simplify the series of complex challenges facing McNaughton and, when examined without accepting *prima facie* the judgements of his contemporaries, McNaughton did not perform all that badly.

Briefly tracing McNaughton's illustrious First World War career, Rickard argues that Arthur Currie's mentorship left an indelible mark on the young counter-battery officer, not least of which was his willingness to assert Canadian interests, often in defiance of his British Army superiors. Most important was Currie's defence of the semi-autonomy of the Canadian Corps. And yet as army commander, McNaughton was not nearly as inflexible as previously assumed when it came to dividing and deploying the Canadian army; Rickard explains that it was not McNaughton's fault alone that the Canadians were used only at Dieppe before the invasion of Sicily in July 1943. In fact, McNaughton agreed to Canadian participation in a number of operations, including TORCH. The Chiefs of Staff, however, preferred to use the Canadians for Home Defence, and Prime Minister Churchill was concerned about the ratio of dominion to British troops in the Mediterranean. According to Rickard, there was consistency in McNaughton's decision making; while he did not actively press for opportunities for the army, he looked to the Chiefs of Staff, took what little was offered, and accepted that the Canadians were to be used as a general strategic reserve (80).

When building the army between 1940 and 1943, McNaughton faced materiel and personnel shortages, and systemic challenges that affected the quality of training undertaken by the Canadians. He was, therefore, not simply a poor trainer; he had to deal with the serious problems that were part and parcel of expansion. McNaughton's performance in Exercise SPARTAN (March 1943) convinced Brooke that McNaughton was unfit for command. Rickard makes the case, however, that although his

performance was far from perfect, it was not worthy of dismissal. He had already begun to absorb the lessons, and given another opportunity, McNaughton would likely have performed far better.

Ultimately, however, McNaughton's personality clashes with Montgomery, Paget, Ralston, Stuart, and particularly Brooke, unduly informed their opinions on his performance and prompted them to remove him from command. Tracing the meetings and messages – many misrepresentative – between the key players during the second half of 1943, Rickard reveals the effect of personality in guiding their actions and interactions. Ultimately, personality, rather than performance, had been the general's undoing.

Captain Rickard has provided a much-needed reassessment of Canada's top general during the formative years of the Canadian Army in the Second World War. Giving weight to both the systemic challenges that came with the rapid expansion of the army and the personality conflicts – the “flame warfare” - in which McNaughton became engaged, Rickard offers refreshing insight into “Andy.” Historians should heed Rickard's methods: by refusing to take the opinions of Brooke and Paget as gospel, he is able to contextualize and evaluate numerous perspectives, and come up with a more balanced assessment. Rickard's narrative also points to further areas of research that would benefit from similar methods, particularly a re-evaluation of the training of the Canadian army, and of Canada's relationship with the British army on strategic and operational levels. All told, Rickard's biography maintains the high standard of scholarship set by many Canadian military historians of late. It offers a refreshing new perspective on one of the key figures in the Canadian and Commonwealth experience in the Second World War and a crucial insight into the role personal politics can play in coalition military commands.

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