



**Eric McGeer, *Varsity's Soldiers: The University of Toronto Contingent of the Canadian Officers' Training Corps, 1914-1968.*
Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019.**

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Prior to its disbandment in 1968, the Canadian Officers' Training Corps (COTC) had contingents on the campuses of all major Canadian postsecondary institutions, both anglophone and francophone,¹ exclusive of the military colleges. Its members were full-time students who received military training during evenings, weekends, and summer breaks. Despite its nationwide presence, neither the organization as a whole nor the

¹ Probably the most famous participant, although a very reluctant one, would have to be the father of the present prime minister, a law student at the Université de Montréal during the Second World War, when enrolment in the COTC was mandatory for medically fit university students; see John English, *Citizen of the World, Volume 1: The Life of Pierre Elliott Trudeau, 1919-1968* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2006), pp. 82-84.

individual contingents have been the subject of a great deal of scholarly attention. The wider COTC has been the subject of a 1993 MA thesis, but only for the period 1908-1935;² besides the University of Toronto, journal articles have appeared on the contingents belonging to the University of Western Ontario (in 2006) and McGill (2010),³ while monographs, now getting quite old, have been written for the contingents of McGill (1947), Western (1956) and Queen's (1978).⁴ Work specific to Toronto has taken the form of a 1995 PhD thesis and a journal article of 2009.⁵ Now, with *Varsity's Soldiers*, Toronto-based military historian Eric McGeer has brought back a literary form—the COTC monograph—that may have appeared to have gone extinct.

In the Beginning

After a fairly lengthy introduction in which, among other things, the author discusses his approach to the research—confined mainly to the voluminous records in the University of Toronto Archives—as well as situating the work in the previous historiography, the book is divided into five large chapters, arranged chronologically. The first, beginning in 1861 and covering the period prior to the First World War, confusingly gives the lie to the “1914” in the book’s subtitle. However, the contingent did not formally come into existence, with the title “Canadian Officers’ Training Corps,” until that year, and so “1861” would not have been technically correct, either.

² Daniel Thomas Byers, “The Canadian Officers’ Training Corps: Support for Military Training in the Universities of Canada, 1908-1935” (MA thesis, Wilfrid Laurier University, 1993), but see also Anne Millar, “Wartime Training at Canadian Universities during the Second World War” (PhD thesis, University of Ottawa, 2015), that deals with many things in addition to the COTC.

³ Andrew Theobald, “Western’s War: A Study of an Ontario Canadian Officers’ Training Corps Contingent, 1939-1945,” *Ontario History* 98, no. 1 (Spring 2006): pp. 52-67; Desmond Morton, “McGill’s Contingent of the Canadian Officers’ Training Corps (COTC), 1912-1968,” *Canadian Military Journal* 10, no. 3 (Summer 2010): pp. 37-47.

⁴ R. C. Fetherstonhaugh, *McGill University at War, 1914-1918, 1939-1945* (Montreal: McGill University, 1947); Hartley Munro Thomas, *UWO Contingent COTC: The History of the Canadian Officers’ Training Corps at the University of Western Ontario* (London: University of Western Ontario, 1956); and Kathryn M. Bindon, *Queen’s Men, Canada’s Men: The Military History of Queen’s University* (Kingston: Eastern Typesetting, 1978).

⁵ James William Noel Leach, “Military Involvement in Higher Education: A History of the University of Toronto Contingent, Canadian Officers’ Training Corps (PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 1995); and Robert Spencer, “Military Training in an Academic Environment: The University of Toronto Canadian Officers Training Corps, 1914-1968,” *Canadian Military History* 18, no. 4 (Autumn 2009): pp. 33-50.

Perhaps the best thing would have been to avoid a date range in the title altogether; in any event, the reader gets an additional, unexpected, chapter, so there is really nothing to complain of. The remaining chapters cover, logically enough, the First World War, the inter-war years, the Second World War, and the postwar period to 1968, when the COTC was permanently discontinued across the country. The author's periodization in this regard is tight, so that, for example, a researcher interested in the Second World War should be able, with confidence, to confine his or her reading to that chapter alone.

There is a noticeable difference in the writing of the first chapter compared to that of the others, and I suspect this may have to do with a relative dearth of source material for the period prior to 1914, when the requirements of a world war saw the creation of a vast military bureaucracy and its attendant paper. The amount of attention devoted in that chapter to the 1866 Battle of Ridgeway, which saw the participation of a number of student volunteers, among whom three were killed, seems somewhat lavish, an impression that only became stronger through subsequent chapters. All the more so the detailed accounts of the creation of the university's Ridgeway memorial windows. Certainly not all will agree that this emphasis is excessive, but with the exception of a much briefer digression in Chapter 3 on a bugle in the university's possession, the remainder of the book manages to maintain a noticeably tighter focus on the contingent itself.

War and Peace

The enormous growth of the contingent during the First World War saw it divided into two streams, one of which, the so-called "proficiency" stream, was intended to better fulfill the COTC's mandate to produce capable officers. (The other, "efficiency" stream, focused on basic drill and musketry.) Nevertheless, by the end of the first winter of the war, it was clear that the holders of proficiency certificates were just as likely as any others to have to serve in the ranks. As McGeer puts it, "a few months of drill and a few days of field exercises could not prepare even the most dutiful and able of student soldiers to be junior officers in the trenches" (5). As the fighting dragged on, though, far from being abandoned, this theme was taken up with greater intensity, leading to the formation, among other spin-off entities, of an Overseas

Training Company in 1916. Although more successful at creating credible officer candidates, this organization bore precious little resemblance to the original, “base model” COTC, which had its officer training courses, funding, and allotment of equipment cancelled by the Militia Department in 1917. Henceforth, the Canadian Expeditionary Force would fill all officer vacancies with experienced men from the ranks, rather than “student trainees holding ‘certificates purporting to qualify them as officers’” (112). This comment is telling.

When the Toronto contingent faced another massive expansion with the coming of the Second World War, there was every intention to do things differently. One of the contingent’s officers assured the *Varsity* student newspaper in early 1940 that “we are training the men as officers this time, whereas in the last war they were given only the bare rudiments of military training, such as would fit them only to be privates” (165). Despite this statement of purpose, though, there were a number of parallels with the previous war. Once again, the contingent was divided, with an Officers Training Battalion, a Training Centre Battalion for basic training, and a preparatory battalion for the underage. There was another spin-off organization, the experimental No. 1 Canadian Army University Course, trialled over the 1942-43 academic year, followed by a No. 2 the following year.⁶ And, crucially, in this war, too, as time went on and experience was gained, the basic COTC model was found wanting.

As early as 1941, the decision was taken that officers would henceforth come from the ranks, but COTC cadets were assured at that time that their training would put them on an equal footing with those from the Active Army vying for a spot at an Officers Training Centre—in effect, an exemption from serving in the ranks. It was not to last. As McGeer describes it, “not all were convinced that the universities produced officer candidates equal to those from the ranks, nor were ‘college boys’ greeted with open arms by the training staff at the OTCs” (193). Writing in April 1943, Minister of National Defence J. L. Ralston pointed out that

⁶ C. P. Stacey, *Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War*, vol. 1, *Six Years of War: The Army in Canada, Britain, and the Pacific* (Ottawa: Queen’s Printer, 1955; 2nd printing [corrected] 1956), pp. 139-40; and Chris Miller, “A U of T Graduate and War Veteran Examines the Legacy of the Generation That Grew Up Fast,” University of Toronto, Alumni, Soldier’s Tower Committee, accessed 22 August 2021, <https://my.alumni.utoronto.ca/s/731/form-blank/index.aspx?sid=731&gid=9&pgid=821>.

experience has shown that the academic standing of C.O.T.C. candidates does not compensate for the training, experience and military knowledge which can only be acquired by the potential officer having had some service in the ranks of the Active Army, including training as a N.C.O. . . . in this connection it has been found that the numbers of failures and repeats at the O.T.C.'s has been considerably higher (approximately double the percentage) amongst C.O.T.C. candidates entering with provisional commissions than amongst the more highly trained candidates who had completed both Basic and Advanced Training" (194-95).

Accordingly, from July 1943, completion of the COTC program would henceforth only provide an exemption from basic training in the Active Army, with officer qualification no longer a part of the syllabus. Training "such as would fit them only to be privates" settled in for the duration of this war, as well.

In each of the world wars, then, hard experience had shown those responsible for providing the army with capable officer candidates that the peacetime model of the COTC was a failure, leading to the abandonment of any pretense to training officers in a meaningful way on the part of the local contingents. McGeer, however, prefers to see this glass as half-full, describing the efforts in World War Two as "valuable" (6),⁷ and, in a real stretch, while recognizing that it was only the spin-off units that had any record of accomplishment in World War One, nevertheless asserts that their success "made the strongest argument for the continuation of the Toronto contingent after the war" (5).

In an address to the Conference of Canadian Universities in 1920, the commander of the McGill University contingent declared that "officers raised from the ranks lacked the social breeding or the intellectual energy to match university students"⁸—a comment of breathtaking elitism, if nothing else. Nonetheless, it seems that the military authorities agreed with this assessment, for soon after each war the local COTC contingents were reconstituted in more or less the form they took prewar, complete with an officer training component. Emphasizing physical fitness, discipline, and the fostering of an interest in the military, the peacetime COTC resembled nothing

⁷ Theobald, in a thoughtful and nuanced paper, is more willing to face reality: "by 1943, the training corps had become a burden for the army, the universities, and most students"; see "Western's War," p. 67.

⁸ Cited in Morton, "McGill's Contingent," p. 42. The quoted text is actually Morton's, not the speaker's.

so much as a glorified cadet corps. And, like the cadet movement, I would argue that the COTC benefited its members far more than it ever benefited the army. As McGeer explains in his final chapter, this view increasingly took hold in the minds of military decision makers in the postwar decades, leading to the permanent disbandment of the COTC only weeks after the establishment of the unified Canadian Armed Forces.

The Ugly, the Bad, and the Good

Although they are definitely minor in comparison with the effort overall, there are some negative aspects here that ought to be mentioned. McGeer unfortunately repeats the old canard that Pierre Trudeau somehow used the COTC “to escape military service” (326 n. 109), when in fact, given that membership of the COTC was compulsory for university students under the 1940 National Resources Mobilization Act, he was no more shirking his duty at that time than any of the Second World War COTC cadets whose service McGeer otherwise takes no exception to. One cannot have it both ways. More seriously, there are some judgments in this book, mainly confined to the notes, whose stridency jars with the otherwise dispassionate, objective tone of the text. For example, one endnote begins as a response to a comment by historian A. B. McKillop, but rapidly unwinds into a lengthy attack, with little connection to the subject at hand, on historians, past and present, sympathetic to the left. The author is of course entitled to his political views, but in his opposition to communists, peace groups, or, indeed, essentially anyone on the U of T campus not in favour of the COTC, terms such as “useful idiots” (307 n. 131), “breathtakingly obnoxious” (247), and “morally autistic” (348 n. 116), which one does not normally see in scholarly writing, do not do him credit. The difference in tone in these instances is readily apparent, leading to the suspicion that the material in the endnotes may not have been subject to the same level of editorial scrutiny as the text. Otherwise, the endnotes contain much that is valuable, and ought not to be skipped, including potted biographies of a number of important individuals that would have been out of place in the text.

On the production side, the quality of reproduction of the photographs is excellent, including a number of instances of long, narrow panoramic views of the entire contingent. However, instead of orienting these particular photos sideways along

the long axis of the page, landscape style, they are invariably kept upright, making it nigh impossible to make out any detail. As for typographical errors, I cannot recall any here, which of course is always a pleasure. The pages are Smyth sewn in an attractive cream-coloured case.

McGeer's narrative style is clear, brisk, and engaging, which makes an enjoyable read of the history of a "unit," if it can be called that, that came dead last in the army's order of precedence.⁹ His affection for his subject—either the explanation for, or the result of, countless hours spent in the U of T Archives—is very clear, to the point where sometimes one wishes he could have been a little more understanding of the views of the opponents of the COTC in the military hierarchy. Nevertheless, the exhaustive citations in the endnotes suggest that he has used the resources of the archives on this subject to the fullest, and I have no doubt that this volume, already, in my view, the work of record on this subject, will remain so for a very long time to come.

In the Balance

My biggest concern before starting *Varsity's Soldiers* was that, given the narrow, small-scale ambit of the subject matter, the author would have had to "pad" his text with material from diverse other sources in order to create a work big enough for a monograph. Similarly, prospective readers familiar with Robert Spencer's 2009 journal article on the contingent may wonder what scope could exist to say more. Nevertheless, I can assure them that, with the possible—and debatable—exception of the Ridgeway material, McGeer has succeeded brilliantly, managing to stay on topic and keep a tight focus on the University of Toronto contingent of the COTC throughout.

Paradoxically, though, I feel that it is precisely that close, unwavering attention on the contingent that is this book's greatest potential weakness, inasmuch as it will probably limit its potential audience. Those with an interest in the broader Canadian Army, by whatever name it went over the long history of the contingent, will find little that they do not already know—certainly not enough to justify reading the whole book.

⁹ At least as of 1944, according to McGeer. I have not been able to verify that statement. Puzzlingly, he is referring specifically to the Toronto contingent, whereas surely an Army order of precedence would only list the COTC as a whole. It is not hard to believe that the COTC would be very low on the list, though.

The best I can say on that score is that the chapter on the Second World War might make a nice companion piece to Daniel Byers's *Zombie Army* on conscription in the Second World War.¹⁰ Likewise, besides a few interesting biographical details on some of its presidents, the reader looking for material on the University of Toronto writ large is advised to look elsewhere. About the only people to whom I would recommend this book, then, would be those with a keen, specific interest in the COTC per se, or perhaps closely allied organizations elsewhere. They are very unlikely to be disappointed with the first COTC monograph in over forty years, but they really have to want it.

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¹⁰ Daniel Byers, *Zombie Army: The Canadian Army and Conscription in the Second World War* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2016).