

## GENERAL SIR ARTHUR CURRIE: A MILITARY BIOGRAPHY

The most important Canadian in the First World War, Arthur Currie was an extraordinarily successful field commander in a war that produced few successful generals. In this biography A.M.J. Hyatt recalls the military career of a remarkable man.

Currie's achievements were realized in spite of some formidable obstacles. He was not a professional soldier, having been a civilian before the war. He entered the war under the shadow of a scandal, which, had it been disclosed at the time, would certainly have brought public disgrace. He was not a charismatic man; he had none of the personal flair of so many successful military leaders. In many ways these apparently negative factors make his story all the more remarkable, the secret of his success the more intriguing. That secret, as Hyatt explains, was a fine sense of tactics: Currie, the 'amateur' soldier, had all the instincts of a dedicated professional, and he used them to minimize the destruction of the young Canadian troops under his command.

When the war was over Currie returned to civilian life, and was knighted for his service. This biography offers the first balanced account of a central figure in Canadian military history.

A.M.J. HYATT is Professor of History at the University of Western Ontario. He is the author of *Dreadnought to Polaris: Maritime Strategy since Mahan*.

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A.M.J. HYATT

# General Sir Arthur Currie: A Military Biography

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In the writing of this book the inferences drawn and the opinions expressed are those of the author himself, and the National Museums of Canada are in no way responsible for his presentation of the facts as stated.

Cover portrait:

*Sir Arthur Currie*, by H.J. Ariss, 1987

pastel on paper, 21" x 28", drawn from a photograph

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The two photographs of Currie as a young man are used courtesy of Lucy C.M. Lewis; the rest are from the Public Archives of Canada.

This book has been published with the help of grants from the Social Science Federation of Canada, using funds provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and from the University of Western Ontario.

This book is dedicated to my teachers. In formal education, at all levels, I was lucky enough to have had at least one outstanding teacher. To the following I shall always be grateful.

Mr Glen Mitchell	Dr D.M. Schurman
Dr Richard A. Preston	Professor S.R. Mealing
Dr E. Cappadocia	Dr Theodore Ropp

My general education has benefited most from the persistent efforts of the best critic I have ever known, Barbara Hyatt.

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## Preface

I began to study Arthur Currie nearly two decades ago. At that time I quickly came to the conclusion that Currie was 'an unrecognized hero.' He was hardly mentioned in textbooks on Canadian history and was frequently misidentified. Happily this is no longer the case. The wide circulation of G.W.L. Nicholson's *Canadian Expeditionary Force*, the publication of books by J.A. Swettenham, Herbert Wood, Don Goodspeed, Jack Granatstein, and Desmond Morton has added enormously to our understanding of Canada's role in the First World War. Daniel G. Dancocks's biography of Arthur Currie provides a popular portrait of the general. Returning to Currie after a break of several years and after the appearance of these works, my view has changed. He is no longer unknown and is certainly not unrecognized. It now is also apparent to me that if he was a 'hero,' he was also a person with a fair share of human frailty. Sometimes stiff and awkward, Currie could also be petulant and vain. He obviously never enjoyed mass popularity with the soldiers he commanded, although he never lost their respect. In spite of the welcome and substantial writing that has appeared, there has been no detailed analysis of Currie's military capacity, which was his main contribution to Canadian history. What follows is an attempt to describe Currie as a soldier and to compare him with other soldiers.

Many years ago G.F.G. Stanley wrote *Canada's Soldiers* and through his brilliant subtitle, *The Military History of an Unmilitary People*, provided a fundamental insight into Canadian attitudes towards all things military. Currie's story, it could be argued, provides the pattern for an unmilitary general: he was a prewar and postwar civilian who loved the army and came to hate war. He instinctively developed the characteristics of a dedicated professional soldier without ever becoming one.

In writing about Currie I have learned a great deal from fellow historians. Writing may be a solitary endeavour, but scholarship is a collective process.

## x Preface

Without the work of Robert Craig Brown and Desmond Morton, my own attempt to understand Currie could not have been completed. Morton, more than anyone else, has made it possible for me to evaluate not only the political background of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, but the militia background of the nineteenth century. I owe him and many others an enormous debt. Theodore Ropp, Richard A. Preston, and C.P. Stacey have helped me over many years in my struggle to understand war and history. Ronald Haycock taught me much about Sam Hughes. Dr W.A.B. Douglas and his predecessors and their staffs at the Directorate of History in Ottawa have provided invaluable help, as have the staff at the Public Archives of Canada. Mr William Constable interrupted a busy schedule to produce the maps in this volume. I am extremely grateful to Mr Herb Ariss for allowing me to use his splendid pastel drawing of Currie. My colleagues at the University of Western Ontario have helped me with good advice over many years. I am particularly indebted to Professor Peter Neary and Professor George Metcalf. The errors and inconsistencies that remain in this account I have created myself.

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- 20 *Redcoats and Patriots: The Rebellions in Lower Canada, 1837–38*, by Elinor Kyte Senior. Canada's Wings, Stittsville, Ontario, 1985. French edition available.
- 21 *Sam Hughes: The Public Career of a Controversial Canadian, 1885–1916*, by Ronald G. Haycock. Wilfrid Laurier University Press, Waterloo, 1986.

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Arthur Curry: a schoolboy in Strathroy



Currie as a captain in the 5th Regiment, Canadian Garrison Artillery



A young soldier observed: 'He always looked too heavy for his horse.'



Directing a practice attack near the Canadian front, June 1917





Currie receiving a knighthood, June 1917



Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig with Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Currie



Major-General Sir H.F. Mercer, Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Currie, General Horne, and General Sir Julian Byng, February 1918



HRH The Prince of Wales with Generals Currie, Morrison, and Watson, 27 October 1918