

NOTE

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Directorate of History
National Defence Headquarters
Ottawa, Canada
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CANCELLED

17 Apr 42

REPORT No. 57,
HISTORICAL OFFICER,
Canadian Military Headquarters.

Plans for British Official Histories
of the Present War.

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1. This report deals with the plans which have been made by governmental agencies in the United Kingdom for the preparation of British Official Histories of the war now in progress. Some facts on this matter have already been presented in the Diary of the Historical Officer, Canadian Military Headquarters, under date 19 Jan 42. Certain further information is now available and a more complete sketch of the situation is therefore attempted.

2. This Report is based on verbal information received by the writer in a succession of interviews with Lieut.-Col. J.S.YULE, O.B.E., (R.E., Ret.) and Professor W.K. HANCOCK, both of the Historical Section, War Cabinet Secretariat.

3. An official approach to Canada in the matter of historical liaison is understood to have been made through the Dominions Office and Canada House. Mr. Charles RITCHIE of Canada House accompanied the writer to an interview with Colonel YULE on 9 Apr 42. It is believed that an official document outlining the British plans for Official Histories is to be prepared and forwarded through the Dominions Office shortly. In the meantime it is considered that the information contained in the present Report may be of interest and value.

4. It should be noted, please, that the information here presented was obtained in confidence, and should therefore not be published without previous consultation with the British authorities.

ORGANIZATION FOR THE PREPARATION OF OFFICIAL HISTORIES

5. The organization for the control and compilation of official histories in the United Kingdom, as now understood by the writer, is as follows.

6. The Historical Section of the Committee of Imperial Defence, the body which has long been charged with work of this type, continues to exist under the new title of "Historical Section, War Cabinet Secretariat". (The Committee of Imperial Defence is inoperative during the present emergency). Brigadier-General Sir J.E. EDMONDS is Secretary of the Historical Section, which has just

moved its main offices from LYTHAM St. ANNES, Lancs., to ABERYSTWYTH, Cardiganshire (P.O. Box No. 7). It is believed that General Edmonds is still chiefly occupied with the work of completing the Official History of the War of 1914-18.

7. The higher direction of the work of preparing histories is in the hands of the "Committee for the Control of Official Histories", which is understood to be presided over by the President of the Board of Education, a member of the Cabinet. Colonel Yule (above, para. 2) is Secretary of this Committee. He and Professor HANCOCK share a room in the War Cabinet Offices, LONDON.

8. In addition, an "Advisory Historical Committee" has been set up with a view to maintaining liaison with the Historical profession and obtaining the advice and aid of eminent members of that profession in the work. A document setting forth the original composition of this Committee is attached as Appendix "A". It is understood that a member from Northern Ireland has since been added. It will be noted that the Committee is headed by Mr. E.A. BENIANS, Master of St. John's College, CAMBRIDGE, and formerly Vice-Chancellor of Cambridge University. The members are an extremely distinguished group of British historians, whose names will carry much weight with professional historians, and some, perhaps, even with the general public. The news of the formation of this Committee and its composition was published in The Times (London) of 19 Dec 41.

9. The general functions of the Advisory Historical Committee are outlined in Appendix "A". It is felt in addition, it is believed, that by bringing this group of eminent historians "into the picture" some possible academic criticism may be forestalled. This Advisory Committee has met and has expressed its general approval and even admiration of the steps already taken, as described below, towards the preparation of Official Histories.

GENERAL SKETCH OF PLANS

10. The plans which have been made for Official Histories contemplate what may be termed three main series of volumes. These are (a) a Diplomatic series; (b) a Civil series; and (c) a Military series, dealing with the operations of the three fighting services. In addition, arrangements have been made for a special series dealing with the Medical history of the war.

11. It is considered that one or more "key volumes" will be required to provide connecting links between the different series: e.g., to correlate diplomatic events with strategic policy.

12. As described by Colonel Yule, the intention is that the histories shall in general be written in such a manner as to make some appeal to the general reader. The British official histories of the war of 1914-18 are not considered particularly successful in this respect; and it has been found that the military volumes are, in fact, of very

limited usefulness, even in such military institutions as SANDEURST and WOOLWICH, which have found many of the accounts of operations too detailed for their purposes.

13. It is apparently proposed to make every effort to complete publication of the whole group of histories within ten years of the conclusion of hostilities. In the past, in connection with the military volumes, it has been found that the comments of participants after the lapse of more than ten years are of very limited value in the preparation of an historical narrative.

14. It is not, of course, proposed to publish any portion of the history of the present war while hostilities continue. It is felt, however, to be sound policy to begin the preparation of manuscripts now, in order that they may be published as soon as possible after the coming of peace.

OFFICIAL DIPLOMATIC HISTORIES

15. With respect to the Diplomatic histories, it is thought by experts that it will be quite impossible to produce an adequate Diplomatic narrative history until 20 or 25 years after the events. No definite scheme for such a history is, therefore, in contemplation at the present time. Plans are limited to the preparation of volumes of documents accompanied by a brief commentary. This work the Foreign Office has in hand under the direction of Mr. E.L. WOODWARD of All Souls College, OXFORD. It is understood that the documents down to the outbreak of the present war have been prepared for publication, and that work is proceeding on those of later date.

OFFICIAL HISTORIES OF CIVIL ACTIVITIES

16. The preparation of the Civil series of histories will necessarily be an enormous and very complicated task. The preliminary work is, however, well advanced, under the direction of Professor W.K. HANCOCK, the eminent Anglo-Australian scholar, and the plan of operations appears to be practical as well as comprehensive.

17. The basis of the scheme now in progress is the appointment to each Civilian Ministry of a Narrator who is charged with the business of preparing an historical account of the wartime work of the Ministry to which he or she is assigned. Many of these Ministries (e.g., Economic Warfare, Information, etc., etc.) will presumably pass out of existence at the conclusion of hostilities, and it is all the more desirable, therefore, that preliminary historical work should be done while they are still in existence and functioning.

18. - These Narrators, it is important to note, are trained historians or economists of recognised standing in their professions. They are well paid (salaries running from £600 to £800 annually, and in one case as high as £1000). The Narrators are members of the War Cabinet Secretariat and their salaries are provided from the Official Histories vote. They work under the general direction of Professor Hancock, whose business it is to co-ordinate the whole Civil programme.

19. Narrators are already at work in most, if not all, of the Civilian Ministries and, in some cases at least, have made themselves useful to the Ministries for current purposes without interfering with their historical activities. It is anticipated, in fact, that in many cases the historical material produced by the Narrators will have considerable practical and immediate value for the Ministries concerned.

20. It seems probable that the Narrators are performing for their respective Ministries tasks not dissimilar, *mutatis mutandis*, from that which the Historical Officer, Canadian Military Headquarters, has attempted to perform for the Canadian Army Overseas since December, 1940; though they are presumably covering not only current happenings but also the work of their Ministries from the outbreak of war, whereas the Historical Officer has so far succeeded in dealing with the events of 1939-40 only in a most sketchy fashion. It is understood that the Narrators are given unrestricted access to files.

21. The volumes of the Civil series will not necessarily be organized on a basis of one study for each Ministry, but will attempt to deal with broad topics which, in some cases, may touch several Departments. For example, it is probable that there will be a study of propaganda: this will touch the Foreign Office, the British Broadcasting Corporation, and the Ministry of Information.

OFFICIAL SERVICE HISTORIES

22. In the volumes dealing with the operations of the fighting services there will be an important break with past precedents. For the war of 1914-18, a separate history was written for each service - Navy, Army and Air Force. The Chiefs of Staff have ruled, however, that in the case of the present war there will be a single account of each campaign, which will include the operations of all three services.

23. It is proposed that the "Military" series of Histories should consist of three groups. The first will be a "general conspectus" of the war, which will presumably be valuable for the general reader and will also serve to correlate the more detailed studies in the other groups. The second group will consist of more detailed accounts of campaigns. The third will comprise special studies of individual operations, designed primarily for the benefit of advanced military students.

24. The first important campaign whose history has been put in hand is that in Norway (April - May, 1940). On this campaign the work is already well advanced. It is being carried on in the following manner.

25. Three Narrators were appointed to compile "first narratives" of the Army operations in the three Norwegian sectors (NARVIK, NANSØS and AANDALSNES) respectively. This section of the work has been completed, and the writer has seen and read the narrative for the NANSØS sector, and, at the request of Colonel YULE, has made some verbal comments upon it. It is based upon War Diaries and upon such additional documents as General CARTON de WIART's final Report, and appreciations by Lieut.-General MASSY, who was C.-in-C. British Forces in Norway. The

work of compilation has been done at ABERYSTWYTH, where both Army and R.A.F. documents are stored.

26. In addition to these three strictly Military narratives the "Historian" charged with preparing the "first draft" of the history will have before him an Air Force narrative of the operations (which is also understood to have been completed), and a Naval narrative compiled by the Historical Section of the Admiralty. He will also have a mass of "high level" papers, which may or may not be digested for his benefit, which will afford him, presumably, all requisite information on high strategic policy and the influence of the Government and the Chiefs of Staff on operations.

27. It is evidently intended that the actual first draft of the Norwegian history shall be written immediately, with a view to publication of the completed history as soon as possible after the conclusion of hostilities.

28. Attached as Appendix "B" is a copy of a "Provisional Note for the guidance of Narrators in the compilation of First Narratives for Histories of Military operations" which has been compiled by Colonel Yule. It serves to throw some light on the procedure now being followed.

29. It is understood that work will begin shortly, along lines similar to those just described, on the history of the operations of the British Expeditionary Force in France and Flanders during the Spring and Summer of 1940.

OFFICIAL MEDICAL HISTORIES

30. Special arrangements have been made with a view to the preparation of a Medical history of the war. These arrangements were described as follows in The Times (London) of 19 Dec 41 :

To direct the compilation of a medical history of the war an editorial board under the chairmanship of the President of the Board of Education has been constituted of representatives of the fighting Services, the Ministry of Health, the Department of Health for Scotland, the Medical Research Council, and the War Cabinet Secretariat. Sir Arthur MacNalty, until recently Chief Medical Officer of the Ministry of Health, has been appointed as editor-in-chief.

POSSIBLE IMPLICATIONS FOR CANADIAN HISTORICAL POLICY

31. It is interesting to consider the possible application of the British programme above described to Canadian purposes, and the extent to which Canadian historical policy is likely to be affected by this programme. The following paragraphs deal merely with Service histories, though obviously the Civil project is of no less importance.

32. It is clear that British practice is not necessarily a guide for Canada in all aspects of this matter, for Canadian conditions differ from those of the United Kingdom in many respects. It is probably desirable, for example, that the Canadian history or histories should be less exclusively an account of operations than is apparently proposed in the case of the United Kingdom. Down to the present time the Canadian Army Overseas has little operational history apart from two relatively minor episodes: the movement of 1 Cdn Inf Bde and attached troops to France in June 1940, and the SPITZBERGEN operation of August and September 1941. Nevertheless, the movement of a large force of Canadian troops to Britain, the development of the organization, training and equipment of that force, and its various experiences in Britain, would be a matter of national interest even in the unlikely event of its engaging in no further operations; while however long and interesting the narrative of operations may ultimately be, these things will continue to have their place. It is obvious that it is very difficult to foresee at the present moment the precise perspective in which the activities of the Canadian Army Overseas will be viewed at the end of the war.

33. So far as can now be judged it is probable that it will be convenient in the case of Canada to continue the practice of producing separate histories of the three fighting services, although in the event of the Canadian Army Overseas participating in large scale combined operations involving Canadian Air and Naval Forces some special procedure may have to be worked out to meet the case.

34. It seems probable, also, that Canadian resources would be unequal to duplicating the three groups of histories described in para. 23. The third group, at least, would probably have to be left to the labours of individual investigators; and the Canadian historian may have to essay the difficult task of writing a narrative not too detailed for the general public, yet detailed enough to have some military value.

35. In spite of all differences, however, it seems desirable that the British plans should be closely scrutinized by Canadians with a view to the possibility of profiting by British example and experience.

36. One aspect of the British programme seems likely to commend itself to all who give the matter serious consideration: the idea of making all possible preparations now for the publication of comprehensive histories at the earliest possible moment after the war. It seems likely that the Canadian public would welcome the publication, within a short time of the conclusion of hostilities, of at least a brief outline history of Canada's part in the war. On the other hand, it is possible that the prompt appearance of a British history might be made an occasion of criticism in Canada if the Dominion was not equally beforehand with the matter.

37. It is obvious, of course, that from the point of view of obtaining effective criticisms of an historical narrative from officers who participated in the events described it is desirable that the narrative should be prepared at a time when these officers' recollections of those events are still fresh.

38. The appointment of an Historical Officer at Canadian Military Headquarters in 1940 may perhaps be taken as an evidence of the desire of the Canadian authorities to provide for the early publication of a Military history after the war. It is believed that the Reports so far prepared by the Historical Officer will provide at least a "skeleton" for the compilation of an outline history of the Canadian aspect of the events of 1941-42 in Great Britain : that is to say, while these Reports are very far from exhaustive it is believed that not many topics of really fundamental importance have gone wholly unnoticed in them. It is hoped, consequently, that these Reports will save the Official Historian both time and effort when he faces the task of writing the history of the Canadian Army Overseas.

39. It will be noted, however, that concern with current happenings has given the Historical Officer little opportunity to deal with happenings in 1940, prior to his own arrival in the United Kingdom. The events of that year will have material interest for the Official Historian, and a great mass of important documentary material dealing with them is available in London. It is hoped that if the Canadian authorities approve the appointment of an Assistant Historical Officer, as requested some time ago, it may be possible to employ part of this officer's time upon the preparation of a comprehensive narrative of the Canadian overseas events of 1940, which may then be circulated to officers who participated, for their comments. Such a narrative, and such comments, it is believed, would be of great advantage to the Official Historian of the future. A number of senior officers of the Canadian Army Overseas have already spoken to the writer of the desirability of proceeding with such a narrative at an early date.

40. It has been informally suggested by members of the Historical Section, War Cabinet Secretariat, that co-operation between British and Canadian historians might produce useful results even in the present preliminary stage. It was suggested, in particular, that a "first narrative" of the operations of 1 Cdn Inf Bde and attached troops in France in June 1940 might be undertaken by Canadian Military Headquarters, and a copy placed at the disposal of the British authorities; while, on the other hand, any relevant material compiled by the British historians would reciprocally be placed at the disposal of the Canadians. In this way unnecessary duplication would be avoided.

41. While it was pointed out that such a Canadian narrative would necessarily be on a larger and more detailed scale than those being prepared by the British Historical Section, Colonel Yule nevertheless expressed the opinion that it would be very useful for British purposes; the British historian of the operations concerned could use as much of the Canadian narrative as he required, and leave the rest. The same Canadian narrative might serve as the basis for more extended treatment in a distinctively Canadian history.

42. No definite action has been taken on these informal approaches, but it seems clear that close co-operation between the British historical authorities and Canadian Military Headquarters may well be to the advantage of both parties. Incidentally, a British account of Canadian operations is perhaps more likely to be completely satisfactory from a Dominion viewpoint if based upon a Canadian first narrative.

C.B. Stacey
(C.B. Stacey) Major,
Historical Officer,
CANADIAN MILITARY HEADQUARTERS.

COPY.

REPORT No. 67
APPENDIX "A"

SECRET.

COPY NO.

G.O.H.(U) 4. (Revise)

6th DECEMBER, 1941.

WAR CABINET.

COMMITTEE FOR THE CONTROL OF OFFICIAL HISTORIES.
(ADVISORY HISTORICAL COMMITTEE)

CONSTITUTION OF THE ADVISORY HISTORICAL COMMITTEE.

Note by the Secretary.

The following have accepted the invitation to serve on the Advisory Historical Committee:-

CHAIRMAN.

Mr. E.A.Benians. Master of St. John's College,
Cambridge.

MEMBERS.

Dr. G.M.Trevelyan, O.M. C.B.E.	Master of Trinity College, Cambridge.
Prof. F.M.Powicke.	Regius Professor of Modern History, University of Oxford.
Prof. G.N.Clark.	Chichele Professor of Economic History, University of Oxford.
Prof. R.H.Tawney.	Professor of Economic History, University of London.
Mr. H.E.Butler, C.B.	Warden of Nuffield College, Oxford; Commissioner for Civil Defence, Southern Region.
Mr. J.P.R.Maud.	Master of Birkbeck College, London; Deputy Secretary, Ministry of Food.
Professor J.D.Mackie, M.C.	Professor of Scottish History and Literature, University of Glasgow.
Mr. E.H.Carr, C.B.E.	Wilson Professor of International Politics, University College of Wales, Aberystwyth.
Mr. C.T.Flower, C.B.	Deputy Keeper of the Public Records.

In the first place the Committee will be asked to advise on such subjects as the planning of the Official Histories of the present War, and on the selection of historians and writers. It is not intended that the terms of reference of the Committee should be limited to these points alone; many more will undoubtedly arise from the Committee's discussions, while others again will be referred to them from the Main Committee.

(Signed) J.S.YULE.

Great George Street, S.W.1.

6th DECEMBER, 1941.

Provisional Note for the guidance of
Narrators in the compilation of First Narratives
for Histories of Military Operations.

General Scheme of Writing the Histories.

1. The method of compiling final Histories of operations which has been evolved in the last 20 years by Sir James Edmonds, is as follows.

A first narrative is compiled by a narrator, or narrators from the primary documents. This is then sent out, with sketch maps, to officers and others who took part in the operations. It has been found that valuable information is received if the participants are given a story to criticise. The comments are examined by the narrator who accepts or rejects them, according to his knowledge of the documents.

The first narrative is now ready, and from it the historian can write his first draft of the history. This first draft can then be sent for the comments of higher Commanders. When these are received the historian produces his final draft. It is useful to have this final draft read by someone who has had no concern in the story so far. When his remarks have been received, it is sent to the press for galley proofs, page proofs and finally for publication.

It is immaterial whether the historian is a different person from the narrator. If the historian, as is sometimes the case, is to carry the work through from start to finish, he must still go through the process of producing a first narrative.

The First Narrative.

2. The first narrative must be full and clear, and an objective factual account of operations. There need be no pretensions to literary style. Criticism must be avoided, as it is undesirable that participants from whom comment is invited, should have their feelings hurt, or otherwise; nor should they be given a line as to the nature of the comments required from them. At the stage when their comments are being scrutinized it may be desirable to make criticisms of the operations to guide the historian.

The object of the First Narrative is to present the historian with all the facts essential to the full story. In cases of doubt the Narrator should err on the side of being too long rather than too short; since, while his narrative can easily be condensed afterwards, expansion of any particular point involves the lengthy process of referring again to the original documents.

The Documents.

3. The sources for the first narrative are the following primary documents:-

(a) In Commands, Formations and units -

The War Diary.

(b) In the War Office -

(i) Branch War Diaries;

- (ii) Telegrams;
- (iii) Intelligence Summaries;
- (iv) Conferences, minutes, and aide memoirs of important conversations;
- (v) Registered files;
- (vi) Correspondence by Members of the Army Council;
- (vii) Correspondence of the Secretary of State;
- (viii) Prime Minister's Minutes.

(c) In the War Cabinet Offices -

- (i) Chiefs of Staff Committee minutes and papers.
- (ii) Defence Committee minutes and papers.
- (iii) Cabinet minutes and papers.
- (iv) Directives and minutes by the Prime Minister and Minister of Defence.

(d) Personal diaries and reminiscences.

4. The narrator will compile his first narrative, in the main, from formation and unit diaries. Although these are all primary documents, they will vary in value, which may be classified as "A", "B", "C" and so on, according to the aspect of an operation which is under consideration. For instance, the "information available" will come from intelligence summaries, reports during an operation, conference notes etc. The appreciation and the final selection of the plan will be found in conference notes. The intentions of the Commander will be in the Operation Orders. For all these, formation diaries will be primary documents "A". For the narrative of an action, the Unit War Diaries are the only primary documents "A", and the story can only safely be written from them. It is true that the course of the operation can be followed from the information received, say at Divisional Headquarters. The Division War Diary for this purpose, however, is a primary document 'B', but will of course form a useful index.

Consolidated report on operations compiled after the events can never be graded above "C"; in general the higher the formation reporting, the lower the grade of the report.

The terms of reference of the Official Histories is to describe operations, so that the work of the Royal Engineers, Royal Signals, etc. and the "Q" arrangements, unless of a special interest, are not to be written up in full.

All diaries must be read. It is surprising how helpful even the diaries of non-combatant units may be in piecing together the general picture and providing useful side lights. Apart from this, the R.E. diaries, for instance, produce interesting indications of what troubles are foreseen; while the Signals diaries are a valuable guide to the positions and moves of Headquarters.

Method of Work.

5. The method of work of a narrator is largely individual and must be evolved by himself. In the first place he must obtain a general idea of the course of operations and divide it up into phases. The first

broad sweep of this can be done best from the Commander's Despatch. It may appear cynical to remark that this is probably the only use of the Despatch to the historian; but the Despatch is a secondary document which is normally published while operations are still in progress.

The narrator then deals with the phase day by day. The Divisional diaries will be found a useful index to show what units are engaged. The narrator will find that all the diaries are curiously self-indexing and full of cross-references. The steps are to get the information clear, the Orders (Corps, Division, Brigade) clear and then the action clear from the unit diaries.

6. For each day documents should be selected for reproduction in full as appendices. The first choice should be generous and before the diaries are put away two copies should be made and filed. From these the final choice will be made for publication.

The narrator too, while at work on the diaries, should note the subjects with which they deal so that a subject index can be compiled while the diaries are under scrutiny. It is for consideration whether the more important place names should not be dealt with in the same way. These notes will be passed up to a clerk for the compilation of the index.

Certain general notes and instructions for the use of abbreviations and symbols will be found in the appendix.

7. Sketch maps should be compiled as the work proceeds. The tracer will produce a skeleton from the maps available on which the narrator can plot the positions of units and put in all the place names which occur in his narrative. A tracer has not previously been employed at this stage, and it will be a matter of evolving the best way in which this should be done.

It has been found that these sketch maps are a useful check on the narrative itself.

Maps and sketches required for the book will be compiled by the draughtsman from the rough maps, under the direction of the narrators and the historian.

8. When several narrators are working together, it has been found better for each to follow up the actions of a formation or on a sector of the front; rather than for narrator "A" to do Z day; "B", Z + 1 and "C" Z + 2, and so on, over the whole front. The first method makes for continuity of narrative and of interest to the writer.

Conclusion.

9. There is no short cut to the compilation of the first narratives. They will be kept permanently in the Historical Section and perhaps in other selected places, and be available, in the future, for the student. When the narrator has finished his first narrative he will be the leading authority on the operations with which he has dealt and will have read more war diaries and documents on the subject than it is good for any man to read again. The student in years to come will, no doubt, check portions of the narrative, and, when he finds it full and accurate, will feel that he can trust the remainder. His thanks, although he may be only able to express them as prayers for the faithful departed, will be the narrators' ultimate reward.