

STRATEGIC COUSINS: AUSTRALIAN AND CANADIAN EXPEDITIONARY FORCES AND THE BRITISH AND AMERICAN EMPIRES

by **John C. Blaxland**

Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006
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Reviewed by Brian Bertosa

S*trategic Cousins*, by the Australian Army's Lieutenant Colonel John Blaxland, is a book delivering, in the main, exactly what the sub-title promises: a historical overview of the military contributions of Australia and Canada in light of the two countries' relationship with their primary security benefactor – Britain, supplanted in the mid-20th Century by the United States. Beginning in the 19th Century, the narrative unfolds chronologically, with chapters dealing with the two World Wars, the Cold War, and the so-called “War on Terror,” among others. Over half of the 231 pages of main text deal with the period following the Second World War. Therefore, those with an interest in current affairs are as suitable a readership for this book as those with a more historical focus.

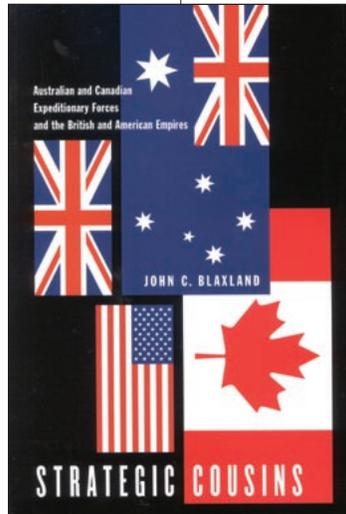
Mainly published – as opposed to archival – works, both primary and secondary, went into the making of this monograph, and the author feels a need to defend this practice in his introduction. This is not surprising, given that the book stems from the author's PhD work at Canada's Royal Military College earlier this decade. However, a synthetic history such as this – that is, one that synthesizes the histories of two different countries and their armies over the span of their existence, noting their similarities and differences along the way – is no place for a document-based approach. That being said, there can be very few works of importance – whether books, journal articles, theses, and much else besides – missing from Blaxland's bibliography, which impresses by its depth and range. Running to 29 pages, it can serve as a valuable research shortcut for students of military history, foreign affairs, or defence policy in either nation. Interesting elements of Blaxland's presentation are his forays into what he calls “plausible alternative situations” (p. xxi). Struck by the magnificent results obtained by Australian and Canadian troops fighting side-by-side at Amiens in 1918, the author chooses, at various junctures in the text, to speculate upon what might have happened had the two countries' forces collaborated at other times. The results can be stimulating. For example, from the Second World War comes his suggestion,

...[that] together, if they [Australia and Canada] could have agreed to cooperate in the use of their forces, be it in Singapore, New Guinea, or elsewhere, they would have been of “European great power proportions” – as their combined feat of arms in August 1918 had once demonstrated. (p. 99)

If by “European great power proportions” is meant numbers, then Colonel Blaxland's suggestion appears unrealistic, as can be determined from his Chart 6, “Commonwealth Military Strengths, Second World War” (p. 96). Therein, it is clear that the combined forces of Australia and Canada in that conflict amounted to no more than a quarter of those of Britain, to say nothing of American forces. More interesting still is his suggested location for the combined effort. While Australians may, with some justification, have disparaged the Canadian Army's role in guarding the UK while the former were gaining valuable combat experience in North Africa, Britain was still very much the ‘mother country’ for most English-speaking Canadians. This sentiment, coupled with (among many other concerns) the sinking of shipping in the St. Lawrence River by German U-boats, would have ensured a speedy demise for any suggestion that Canada devote all of her effort to the Pacific.

One might, just as plausibly, have asked the Australians to send the entire 2nd Australian Imperial Force to help garrison Britain, or to participate in the Normandy landings while the Japanese were in New Guinea and bombing Darwin. With there being no question (after Australia brought her troops home from the Middle East) of either country splitting her army between the two oceanic theatres, the concentration of Australian forces in the Pacific, and Canadian forces in Europe, was, in my view, the only plausible scenario.

The chapter dealing with the most recent period, “Responding to the Long War on Terrorism,” highlights the hazard of bringing one's analysis too close to the time of writing – namely, that one's interpretation, or even just the overall tone of the writing, may be overtaken by events. This is well illustrated by Blaxland's approach to the Iraq invasion of 2003. While events from 2006 are referenced, i.e., the election of Stephen Harper's Conservatives, it appears that the bulk of the research for this book was completed before the end of 2003. Unmistakably in favour of his country's participation in the Iraq invasion, he quotes from an Australian government source expressing concerns about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq – with no acknowledgement (as was made abundantly clear before 2006) that WMD proved to be arguably the biggest canard among the justifications for intervention. The author cites articles, all but forgotten now, by right-wing Canadian journalists chastising their country for staying out of the war,



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and we are even treated to nauseating sermons on 'values' by the neo-conservative commentator Victor Davis Hanson. Writing *qua* military historian, Blaxland would have done better to confine his efforts to periods that have had sufficient time for mature reflection, but *qua* political scientist (the methodologies of both disciplines are employed in this work), he, of course, has to engage with current events as best he can.

Following the main body are 45 pages of appendices consisting of charts and tables comparing the two countries and their armed forces, a historiographical essay well illustrating the dearth of previous work on Blaxland's topic, and Appendix Eight, "Exploring the Parallels between Australia and Canada," arguably the most provocative part of the book. Here, Blaxland cuts to the heart of the phenomena, both of Australia's relative bellicosity and Canada's relative complacency (relative to each other, that is) in military affairs, and it should not make comfortable reading, particularly for Canadians concerned about their country's defence posture. Among many examples, his identification of the electoral importance of the province of Quebec, the traditionally isolationist stance of Quebecers, and the efforts of successive federal governments, particularly Liberal governments, to accommodate defence policy to this mindset, holds particular explanatory power. That being said, the surprisingly muted response of Quebecers to the recent deaths of some of their soldiers in Afghanistan, contrasting greatly with the histrionics of some members of the Quebec elite during the World Wars, suggests that a less anti-military outlook may have lain unsuspected there for a considerable time now.

If any theme in *Strategic Cousins* could be said to be a preoccupation of the author, it is that there has been so little cooperation between the Australian and Canadian militaries over the course of their histories. On that subject, I have to side with those who "...may contend that there must be good reasons why this state of affairs has been so enduring." (p. 221) For the period of the Second World War, I have already ventured some likely reasons. For the present day, Blaxland himself (acknowledging the contribution here of his fellow PhD candidate, Robert Addinall) provides an explanation in Appendix Eight. After explaining how

Australia's geo-strategic isolation forces it to take defence seriously, we are told,

...[that] Canada's strategic position has also tended to make it a complacent ally that Australians have not considered worth pursuing vigorously as a close security partner, beyond their shared membership in quadripartite (United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada) and other U.S.-led fora. (p. 275)

Difficult stuff for a Canadian to read, but more difficult still to refute. Nevertheless, perhaps a more satisfactory explanation, valid for both nations, would be that the armed forces of both Australia and Canada are simply too small to be serious strategic partners. With the demise of the British Empire in the middle of the last century, the United States is really "...the only game in town" now. Isolated as they are on the edge of Asia, the Australians are keen to court the biggest security benefactor in the 'Anglosphere,' and to maintain American goodwill. The US fulfills the same role for Canada by geographic default. Perhaps Australians are simply puzzled, maybe even envious, that Canadians largely take for granted that for which Australians feel they have to work so hard.

This book is unfortunately marred by numerous niggling errors that, for the most part, could not reasonably have come from the pen of a senior army officer. As just one example of many, in Appendix Three, "Military Hierarchy Terminology," naval ranks appear under the heading of "Air Forces," and vice-versa. However, since these occur mostly in the charts and tables, i.e., in material that would have received a going-over by the staff at McGill-Queen's, I feel the blame for this must lie squarely at their feet. Colonel Blaxland's writing is tight, his narrative brisk and confident. Given the breadth – thematic, geographic, and chronologic – of material he discusses, it is difficult to imagine a student of military affairs on either side of the Pacific who would not gain something from *Strategic Cousins*.

Brian Bertosa is an independent scholar whose articles and reviews have appeared in the *Canadian Military Journal*, the *Journal of Military History*, *War and Society*, and the *Australian Defence Force Journal*.

VICTOR BRODEUR: OFFICIER DE LA MARINE CANADIENNE (1909-1946)

by Bill Rawling

Outremont, Québec, Athéna, 2008
268 pages, \$29.95

Reviewed by Hugues Létourneau

Some years ago, naval historian Richard Mayne spoke of the relative silence in academic and naval circles surrounding the post-Second World War history of the Canadian Navy – a silence that lasted more than thirty years and was not

definitively broken until the *RCN in Retrospect 1910-1968* conference of 1982. Only since the 1980s has the study of Canadian naval history attained a degree of momentum.

In 2010, the Canadian Navy will celebrate its centenary. In comparison with the annals of European navies, and even the United States Navy, a hundred years is a short time. However, as Mayne pointed out, the process of catching up on our history is now well under way.

Out of some 200 people in the Canadian Navy to have risen to the rank of rear-admiral, only six – three percent – have been French-speaking Quebecers. A small contingent, and Brodeur was the first of them: like most