**The Battle of Vimy Ridge was not a nation-builder, historian Tim Cook writes**

The Ottawa historian's new book goes far beyond his trademark cinematic descriptions of battles into very political territory.

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**Historian Tim Cook looks over some uniforms that will be part of the Vimy Ridge galleries as the Canadian War Museum gears up to commemorate the centenary of the Battle of Vimy Ridge with a range of programs and exhibitions including new artifacts, audio and video added to the Battle of Vimy Ridge section of Canadian Experience Gallery 2 and Vimy – Beyond the Battle explores how and why Canadians commemorate by looking at private and collective memories of the Battle of Vimy Ridge, the First World War and more recent conflicts. Wayne Cuddington/Postmedia**WAYNE CUDDINGTON / POSTMEDIA

During the early hours of the Battle of Vimy Ridge in France April 9, 1917, the 562 soldiers of Ottawa’s 38th Battalion fought valiantly. But the German defence was fierce, prompting the Ottawans to dive for cover in shell craters, not knowing some were as deep as houses and filled with muck.

The ensuing horror is described in vivid detail by Ottawa author Tim Cook in his new book, Vimy: The Battle and the Legend.

“They slid down the slick walls,” writes the Canadian War Museum historian, “clutching at the occasional root or rotting body to stay out of the slime at the bottom. The slick muddy walls made it nearly impossible to climb out again and the piteous cries of men rose and fell as they slowly lost strength and hope.” Ninety soldiers from the 38th were killed that day, with many more wounded.

Despite some rocky moments, the four divisions of the Canadian Corps, fighting together for the first time in the First World War, ultimately achieved victory during the four-day battle at Vimy. Soldiers from other allied nations had earlier tried to capture Vimy and had failed. The victory was Canada’s. But the costs were enormous, with 3,600 Canadian deaths.

In subsequent years, the Battle of Vimy Ridge has been frequently described by politicians, soldiers, authors and journalists as The Birth of a Nation. The Canadian identity was supposedly forged amid the sacrifices and heroism at Vimy Ridge as soldiers from coast to coast united in victorious battle. Four Canadians, three posthumously, received the Victoria Cross, the Commonwealth’s highest military honour, for their bravery at Vimy.

Cook, however, characterizes the “birth of a nation” theory as a “myth” created by the deliberate massaging of public opinion over the decades. He does not even see Vimy as necessarily our most important battle of the First World War.

Other candidates in his view include the Second Battle of Ypres, the first major battle fought by Canadian troops in the First World War. It took place April 22 to May 25, 1915, outside the Belgian city of Ypres. “The untested Canadians,” says the Canadian Encyclopedia, “distinguished themselves as a determined fighting force, resisting the horror of the first large-scale poison gas attack in modern history, and holding a strategically critical section of the frontline until reinforcements could be brought in. More than 6,500 Canadians were killed, wounded or captured in the battle.”

But Vimy is far more etched in our collective memory than is Ypres in part because politicians and soldiers decided early last century to build Canada’s largest war memorial in Europe at Vimy, rather than Ypres or elsewhere. The memorial is 72 metres long with two vertical shafts 30 metres high. It is dramatic and awe-inspiring, crowning what has become holy land for many Canadians.

The various government-organized pilgrimages over the years, plus prime ministerial speeches, have reinforced the notion that this ridge in northwestern France is, indeed, the birthplace of Canadian nationalism.

And then there is Pierre Berton’s 1986 book, Vimy, which sold 170,000 copies in its first two years of publication. The country’s most famous and prolific popular historian has probably done more than anyone else in modern history to beatify Vimy.

An interesting footnote to Vimy is that one Cpl. Adolf Hitler of the 16th Bavarian Reserve Infantry Regiment had been stationed there but was transferred out a few months before the Canadian assault. “Had his unit been on Vimy Ridge during the ramped-up Canadian artillery blitz, Adolf Hitler might have fallen victim to shellfire, as did thousands of his German comrades, and world history might have turned out very differently,” Cook writes.

This year is the 100th anniversary of the battle. Expect to hear much about it. Thousands of Canadian school children will make a pilgrimage to Vimy this year. The war museum is organizing exhibits in Ottawa and elsewhere. And then there is Cook’s book, which may be interpreted in some quarters as raining on the parade.

“Canada was, indeed, forever changed by the Great War but Vimy did not make the nation,” Cook writes in his book’s conclusion. “It was the nation that made Vimy.”

While Vimy plays an iconic role in English-Canada, the picture is very different in Quebec, where the most lasting memory of the First World War is not Vimy but the shooting in Quebec City of dozens of anti-conscription protestors. How then can Vimy be perceived as this great unifying event?

Cook has written eight other books about the two world wars. He has received various honours, including an Order of Canada, twice the Ottawa Book Award and in 2009 the Charles Taylor Award for Literary Non-fiction for *Shock Troops: Canadians Fighting the Great War, 1917 – 1918, Volume Two.*

This book goes far beyond Cook’s trademark cinematic descriptions of battles into very political territory. The result is a valuable tool for anyone who wants to understand how national myths are created. Cook does not say Vimy is unimportant; he simply states that it is not the place where Canada, its nationalism and patriotism, were born, despite the valour and sacrifices of soldiers like those of Ottawa’s 38thBattalion.

Found online at: <http://ottawacitizen.com/entertainment/books/the-battle-of-vimy-ridge-was-not-a-nation-builder-historian-tim-cook-writes>

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