

Eric McGreer and Terry Copp, with Matt Symes. The Canadian Battlefields in Italy: Sicily and Southern Italy. Waterloo, ON: Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies, 2008.

Christine Leppard, University of Calgary

A must-have for any Canadian tracing the footsteps of Farley Mowat and the rest of 1st Canadian Infantry Division from the beaches of Pachino through the Straits of Messina to “Maple Leaf City” Campobasso is Eric McGreer’s and Terry Copp’s guidebook, The Canadian Battlefields in Italy: Sicily and Southern Italy. This guidebook is McGreer’s second on Italy, and is the latest edition in the series of battlefield guidebooks published by Wilfrid Laurier University and the Canadian Battlefields Foundation since 1994.¹ It largely lives up to the high standards set by Copp, who is also the series editor, when he penned the first guidebooks on Normandy and Northwest Europe. McGreer and Copp have capably pared down volumes of information into a manageable narrative and provided many travel tips necessary for navigating Sicily. Matt Symes’ design and layout offer poignant pictures contrasting the scenery and urban landscapes in Sicily and Southern Italy from 1943 and 2008, helping the traveller to orientate themselves both physically and historically.

Despite its many strengths, however, the *Sicily and Southern Italy* guidebook is the victim of inconvenient timing. For many years, the Italian Campaign has been the remittance son of the Normandy Campaign. Understaffed and underequipped during

¹ Eric McGreer with Matt Symes, The Canadian Battlefields in Italy: Ortono and the Liri Valley (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007).

the war, the “D-Day Dodgers” went largely understudied in subsequent years. This has recently started to change, thanks in large part to the efforts of Lee Windsor at the University of New Brunswick and Douglas Delaney at the Royal Military College. Historians and graduate students are starting to re-visit the established interpretation of the campaign that focused on poor command decisions and the limitations of artillery-based tactical doctrine.² New questions raised by these Young Turks include: was Canadian doctrine as inflexible as historians have previously concluded?³ What lessons were the Canadians learning?⁴ How effective was the 1st Canadian Armoured Brigade in the rugged Italian terrain?⁵ Were the Canadians playing nice with the American, British, and Commonwealth forces fighting beside them?⁶ One of the best examples of this important new research is Windsor’s 2007 dissertation on the fall 1944 Battle for the Gothic Line, in which he argued that during “Operation Olive,” the Allies were fighting on a shoestring budget with the purpose of tying down the Germans and their equipment in Italy, to help the war on other fronts. This is an important revision of the common thesis that the operation failed when the Allies were ground to a halt by the Germans in their race northwards.⁷ For now, however, the best monograph on the campaign remains G.W.L. Nicholson’s comprehensive, but increasingly outdated official history, *The Canadians in Italy* (1956).⁸

McGreer’s and Copp’s guidebook reflects the transition currently occurring in the historiography. Indeed, their familiarity with the trends in the field is revealed when they seem to agree with Windsor’s revisionist thesis on the Italian Campaign,

² Two exemplary historians who helped shape the original narrative are Brereton Greenhous and Bill McAndrew. See Brereton Greenhous, “‘Would It Not Have Been Better to Bypass Ortona Completely...?’ A Canadian Christmas, 1943,” *Canadian Defence Quarterly* 18:5 (1989): 51-55; William J. McAndrew, “Fire or Movement?: Canadian Tactical Doctrine, Sicily—1943,” *Military Affairs* 51:3 (July 1987): 140-145.

³ Lee Windsor, “‘Boforce’: 1st Canadian Infantry Division Operations in Support of the Salerno Bridgehead, Italy, 1943” *Canadian Military History* 4:2 (1995): 51-60.

⁴ Douglas Delaney, *The Soldiers’ General: Bert Hoffmeister at War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005).

⁵ William Pratt, MA Student, University of New Brunswick.

⁶ Charlie Eddie, “Before They Were the D-Day Dodgers: 1st Canadian Infantry Division and Operation Chesterfield,” (MA Thesis, University of New Brunswick, 2009).

⁷ Lee Windsor, “Anatomy of Victory: 1st Canadian Corps, Allied Containment Strategy, and the Battle for the Gothic Line,” (PhD Dissertation, University of New Brunswick, 2007).

⁸ G.W.L. Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy: Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War, Volume II* (Ottawa: Queen’s Printer and Controller of Stationary, 1957).

noting that Field Marshall Bernhard Montgomery believed by early 1944 that it was “a mistake to drive the German forces from Italy.” Whereas Winston Churchill wanted to secure Italy as quickly as possible, “Monty” felt that bleeding the Germans white in Italy would hurry the war in other theatres, particularly by facilitating the bombing of German cities and keeping the Germans guessing about the Allies’ next move.⁹

In other cases, however, McGreer and Copp opt for the standard narrative. The most obvious point is that their attention remains largely fixed on the Canadians. This may seem like an unfair criticism, considering it is a guidebook to Canadian battlefields. But new research is paying increasing attention to what was happening on the Canadians’ flanks in all operations and battles, and questioning how this influenced the Canadian front.¹⁰ McGreer and Copp certainly contextualise the Canadian operations within the framework of other Canadian experiences, but they offer little on what else was going on adjacent to, and certainly affecting, the Canadians during each operation. Not only is this detrimental to the historical interpretation, but could also hurt the traveller’s trip; no one should miss visiting the citadel at Enna, with spectacular views of the Canadian line of advance, simply because the position was held by the Americans.

All told, McGreer and Copp should be applauded for incorporating some of the newest research on the Campaign into the guidebook. When Copp wrote the first Normandy guidebook in 1994, he had already started developing his landmark revision of the Normandy Campaign, and the guidebook reflected it. McGreer, a specialist in Byzantine history, was not so well positioned, and Italy has been but a secondary focus for Copp.¹¹ While this book is commendable overall, the two will likely need to publish a revised edition that reflects the new wave of research that is emerging from this quickly evolving field.

When they do publish the next edition, they should bear in mind two points. First, the maps do not provide enough information. Travellers should be sure to carry

⁹ Eric McGreer and Terry Copp with Matt Symes, *The Canadian Battlefields in Italy: Sicily and Southern Italy* (Waterloo, ON: Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies, 2008), 84.

¹⁰ Eddie, “Before They Were the D-Day Dodgers.”

¹¹ Terry Copp, “Beginning the Battle for Sicily,” in *Legion Magazine*, 1 September 2005; Copp, “From Leonforte to Agira: Army, Part 61” in *Legion Magazine*, 1 November 2005.

another map with them, be it a road map or perhaps the more detailed campaign maps from the official history. This is not just to help with navigating Sicily's highways, but also the history. Symes, McGreer, and Copp chose not to include traditional campaign maps (as were used in the Normandy Guidebooks), opting instead to include Google Earth images with cities, roads, troop movements, etc. super-imposed on top. These images are valuable in showing some of the contours of the ground, but many have too little information to contextualise the battlefield for the traveller. For example, on page 18, McGreer and Copp go to great lengths to explain the importance of Enna, and yet it is not marked on the Google Image map two pages later. This is not the only instance of Google related shortcomings, and these are disappointing. There is a fine line between "easy to understand" and "over-simplified," and unfortunately the Google Earth images are not walking it.

Secondly, McGreer and Copp would do well to include more on important historical debates about the campaign, even if the Canadians were not directly involved in the decision-making. For example, the Allies crossed the Straits of Messina on 10 September, days after the Germans, who crossed with little resistance from Allied bombers, navies or ground troops. Consequently, the Germans were able to get men and materiel to Italy, dig in, and force the Allies to wage a slow slogging war of attrition up the Italian boot. Why did the Allies not pursue the Germans across Messina? Should they have? Although suggesting travellers should cross the strait, the authors do not key-in on this debate.¹²

Italy, the "soft underbelly" that the Allies crawled up—in Churchill's words—like harvest bugs against the grain, should be visited by any Canadian interested in military history. The difference from Normandy is stark; Italy's rough mountainous terrain, in contrast to Normandy's gently undulating hills, is easy to imagine as a battleground. The same features that helped the Germans in their defence also make it a challenging and exciting journey for the battlefield tourist. Indeed, to see just how rugged it is, pay a visit to the canonizing battlefield at Troina, where the American 1st Infantry Division, the "Big Red One," fought a key battle, or to "Castle Hill" above Assoro, taken by stealth by the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment. Despite a few

¹² For more on this debate, see Carlo D'Este, Bitter Victory: The Battle for Sicily, 1943 (London: William Collins Ltd, 1988).

shortcomings, McGreer's and Copp's The Canadian Battlefields in Italy: Sicily and Southern Italy provides a concise and by all accounts accurate overview of the campaign. New trends in the historiography should prompt a second edition, but in the meantime, Canadian travellers to Italy's Second World War battlefields should ensure that they have this guidebook in hand.

Christine Leppard is a PhD Candidate in history at the University of Calgary. Her dissertation examines I Canadian Corps and the complexity of waging coalition warfare during the Italian Campaign of the Second World War. Thanks to the generous support of the Canadian Battlefields Foundation, she has toured numerous battlefields in Northwest Europe and Italy. Currently, Christine is a co-chair of the upcoming international conference, "Seventy Years On: New Perspectives on the Second World War."