



Vimy

Pierre Berton

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One chill Easter dawn in 1917, a blizzard blowing in their faces, the four divisions of the Canadian Corps in France went over the top of a muddy scarp known as Vimy Ridge. Within hours, they held in their grasp what had eluded both British and French armies in over two years of fighting: they had seized the best-defended German bastion on the Western Front.

How could an army of civilians from a nation with no military tradition secure the first enduring victory in thirty-two months of warfare with only 10,000 casualties, when the French had lost 150,000 men in their unsuccessful attempt? Pierre Berton's haunting and lucid narrative shows how, unfettered by military rules, civilians used daring and common sense to overcome obstacles that had eluded the professionals.

Drawing on unpublished personal accounts and interviews, Berton brings home what it was like for the young men, some no more than sixteen years old, who clawed their way up the sodden, shell-torn slopes in a struggle they innocently believed would make war obsolete. He tells of the soldiers who endured horrific conditions to secure this great victory, painting a vivid picture of trench warfare. In his account of this great battle, Pierre Berton brilliantly illuminated the moment of tragedy and greatness that marked Canada's emergence as a nation.

Vimy Details

Date : Published June 15th 2008 by Pen & Sword Books (first published 1986)

ISBN : 9780850529883

Author : Pierre Berton

Format : Paperback 336 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, War, Cultural, Canada, World War I, Military, Military History, Military Fiction, Historical, Literature, 20th Century, France

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From Reader Review Vimy for online ebook

Terrance Kutney says

Another excellent book from Pierre Berton. There is a sense of urgency in his narrative of the Battle of Vimy Ridge, and I couldn't stop reading. I am always impressed with the way that Berton blends the personal experiences of those involved with the historical narrative. Berton makes history come alive.

Michelle says

This book was well written. It was very detailed (sometimes gruesomely so, but that's war) but it didn't bog you down with unnecessary information. Honestly, what can I say? Wow. I've always had a certain respect for veterans, but after reading this book, it's gone to a whole new level. These Canadian men (some were so young, could you even call them men?) were so amazing. The majority of them had no idea what they were in for, but they bravely fought for their country. This book made me proud to be Canadian.

Fred Dameron says

A wonderful tale of a nation coming of age. Berton does ask was it worth it? The answer being no but such are myths made of. In the U.S. it's Valley Forge and Trenton, France, the Bastille, England the Glorious Fourth and Trafalgar and in Canada it's Vimy. How it was done is a masterpiece of detail and new thought. Berton tells the story with humor, a historians attention to detail, and personnel stories and remembrances. A truly good read.

Maurice Tougas says

The late, great Canadian historian Pierre Berton details the WWI assault on Vimy Ridge, the first time Canadian forces — fighting as Canadians, not British subjects — united in battle. Vimy is not well known elsewhere, but it is seen as a pivotal moment in Canadian nationhood. Berton goes into extraordinary detail about the battle, which featured everything that was horrendous about First World War fighting. The 100th anniversary of Vimy is next year, and if you're the least bit interested in Canadian history, you should read this book.

JW says

Thoroughly Canadian in perspective, Vimy is not your book if you're looking for a balanced view of the events of this now-famous (only in Canada) battle.

Vimy, however, is your book if you want a thoroughly human take on what it was like for the soldiers of the Dominion who fought and won and lost on that terrible morning, and who did in a few hours what the

English and French could not after two years of trying -- beat the Germans and take Vimy Ridge.

It's Berton the historian/storyteller at his best, and required reading for any Canuck come Remembrance Day.

Mikey B. says

Page 255 (my book)

The decomposing body of a German, uncovered by the diggers, hung over the back wall [of the trench]. To Moir's astonishment and disgust a new machine gunner...began tearing the body out with his bare hands to see if there were any souvenirs in the corpse's pockets. The Canadians were known for this incorrigible habit... "The British fight for glory, the Canadians for souvenirs." How thin, Moir thought to himself, is the veneer of civilization.

Page 236

The scenes of death on all sides were not heroic but sickening... That sort of thing was never shown in the Victorian paintings of gallant officers expiring slowly in the arms of their comrades, a small pink stain on the shirt front, a hand raised languidly in a kind of greeting as if the hero were sinking into a peaceful sleep. Such scenes, if they had ever existed, were obsolete. Never again would war be referred to as "noble".

I felt this book to be an overall excellent accounting of the Vimy battle – with the build-up and the actual siege of Vimy Ridge being strikingly told. But what stands out are the people involved – and their individual stories. The author gives us many levels - from the foot soldiers to the officers, plus some of the technical details.

Many of the Canadian soldiers were British immigrants to various parts of Canada – from Halifax to the rather uninhabited Canadian West. Many had settled in this land in the last 10 to 20 years. They were used to hard manual work on farms or Canadian mines or lumber camps. They knew horses – the backbone of World War I. So they “adapted” to trench warfare in a better way than their urban British counterpart. Also many Canadians were more physically fit compared to British and French soldiers.

Another interesting aspect brought out by the author, Pierre Berton, is that for the most part the Canadians were not snobs. Officers and regular infantry soldiers would talk informally to one another – this was unheard of in the British army. British born Arthur Currie, was the chief commanding officer for the Vimy assault, but had lived for several years in Canada. He made sure that “all” troops knew their role and task in the upcoming attack – unheard of in the British and French army where troops were treated as automatons.

Pierre Berton also writes well of the aftermath of Vimy. Before, many of the troops considered themselves British first and Canadian second. After the victory this started changing. This victory was Canadian organized with four Canadian divisions – with little British input – aside from equipment. Also both the French and British armies had attempted, and failed, to take Vimy Ridge.

The massive Canadian National Vimy Memorial monument in France attests to this as a Canadian

achievement. It is maintained by Veterans Affairs Canada. As a veteran remarked when visiting the site in 1930:

Page 302

“Europe, when viewing the finished work, will change her impressions of the Canadians as a people.”

Jonathan says

A well-written popular history of the Canadian Army's successful assault on Vimy Ridge during the First World War in April 1917. This was the first attack by the Canadian Corps as a separate unit and, by in large, it was carried out with dispatch and professionalism. As time passed, the Canadians made a great deal of this assault, claiming that it helped define Canada as a nation, and later built an enormous memorial on the site of the battle. While the book traces the course of the battle, including the preparations and the battle's aftermath, the emphasis of the narrative is on the conditions on the battlefield (which were pretty grim) and what the experience of battle was like for the soldiers who participated. Worthwhile both as a study of a successful Western Front attack, and of the history of the Canadian military tradition.

Rik Brooymans says

Another brilliant book in the Berton canon. If you are in any way interested in Canadian history, military history or WWI, this has to be a must-read. Berton's anecdotal style tracks and relates a grand historical event in an easy to read, digestible format that conveys the scale and horror of the assault that, some say, defined and crystallised the idea of Canada as a nation.

As a side note, this book should also be a must-read for anyone carrying the misconception of war as a glorious and honourable pursuit, or labouring under the false impression that personal skill or valour is the most important factor in survival.

That's not to say that heroes don't rise above the muck and mire. Byng, Currie and McNaughton should be names of greater awareness in the Canadian consciousness.

Bernie Charbonneau says

I had the pleasure this Remembrance Day to listen to a Great War Veteran at my local legion and that got me thinking of how naïve I am to the history of this world conflict. Oh sure, I know some of the basics but I challenged myself to learn more of this period in history considering that we are celebrating the 100 years of battles involved. Being Canadian, Vimy by this renowned Canadian author seemed like the obvious place to start.

I had heard over and over that Vimy, The battle of Arras, was the push in April 9 1917 that was the coming

of age of our Canadian identity as a military unit. Of this, I cannot say but having read this novel, I sure felt proud of my ancestors. Having not been in the service I cannot imagine what it must have been like and I will not insult anyone who has fought for country to liken the situation to anything that I have experienced in my lifetime. I am just so thankful of the kids, yes kids, young men and women who felt such a calling to sacrifice themselves to help the motherland of Britain at the time.

This novel is a must read for a Canadian or anyone for that matter who wishes to learn of a ridge that was impenetrable until the Canadians decided that enough was enough.

Ben says

"...the country has never overcome their loss in the First War; they were a different breed... Who can say what these future entrepreneurs, lost in the appalling trench warfare of 1914-18, would have wrought if they had lived?" - Author's Note, Pierre Berton.

James Christensen says

Well written & compelling recounting of the WW1 battle at Vimy Ridge which the Canadians took in less than a day w/ 50,000 troops (lost 11,000). The reason for the success was drilling of platoons (a new concept) so that each member knew each of the other's duties, each knew of their specific objective as well as the overall battle plan - the youngest private felt free to question the commander. Advancing troops were preceded by a withering barrage of artillery & machine gun spray, all orchestrated w/ precision & aerial spotters to avoid friendly fire. It was an innovative form of battle which revolutionized warfare tactics.

Jerome Lengkeek says

Highly recommended read to any who are interested in Canadian history. The Battle at Vimy Ridge is often referenced by Canadians as the birthplace of our nationhood, the moment when we truly came together as an independent nation of our colonial motherland. Berton explores this sentiment by working through the stories of individual Canadian soldiers' experiences to come to a fascinating conclusion. Beautifully written, moving, educational, and thought provoking. My only caveat is that it does not flinch at the more graphic aspects of the brutality of trench warfare (but neither does it glorify it or dramatize it).

Leif says

In my opinion, this book cements Pierre Berton into his position as one of Canada's best modern-age writers. His research is incredible, and as the book goes along and we follow the stories of these Canadians who are training to give their British leaders their first victory of the war, one gets a sense of the incredible tragedies and massive loss of lives that modern war inflicts, even though many may think this war wasn't as bad. For some time I have been fascinated at the suffering and bravery of men that fought in the First World War, and this book gives me a double dose, a combination of factual reporting and descriptive writing. Other titles of

note from Pierre Berton that I have greatly enjoyed were 'Yukon' and 'The Great Depression'.

Tiffany says

One thing that I always loved about history class was learning about the First World War, and Canada's role in it. Out of all the battles that Canadians participated in during World War I, the Battle for Vimy Ridge is Canada's most infamous. As a matter of fact, I tend to find that this battle is one that most Canadian schoolchildren know about the most, or at least they did before they 'child proofed' our damn history classes after I graduated from high school.

Vimy is a book that gets more into depth about the Battle for Vimy Ridge. It is a book told through eyewitness testimony/letters, and is very well researched. However, Pierre Berton is highly critical of this battle, and there are clues to his poor opinions hidden in the bulk of his writing. Despite this, Berton did an amazing job in documenting this battle and just how important it is to Canadians and our history.

The one thing that I have always admired about Berton is his ability to show us how something happened, and exactly what happened with his writing. With Vimy, we are transported back into time to 1917, where we are able to witness the events of the battle through the eyes of our brave Canadian soldiers.

Berton was a very great historian, and an amazing writer, who had an outstanding ability to teach us Canadian history without being afraid to. It's just a shame that a lot of the schools refuse to teach children this history. If it weren't for cadets, one of my young sisters would have had no idea what the First World War was, and if it weren't for this book, she would have had no idea about the battle for Vimy Ridge.

This book is definitely a worthwhile read.

Emily says

I've always felt drawn to and particularly affected by anything that is related to the First World War, out of some mixture of horror and fascination, so this is where I began my sampling of Pierre Berton's oeuvre. What stuns me is that the preparations that the Canadians made in the months leading up to the assault seem so simple and so commonsense in retrospect that it's easy to (not entirely fairly) wonder why the British just couldn't see it, like looking back at Scott's ill-fated push to the South Pole. There was a huge loss of life at Vimy, but it pales by comparison with the bloodbath on just the first day of the Somme. The other thing that is interesting to me is that so many people identify Vimy as the moment when a Canadian national identity truly emerged, and yet, in the second half of the twentieth century, I would have said that the national identity that developed was one, not of the praise of military heroism, but of a voice for peace and justice in the world. Granted, I was not raised in Canada and am only just starting to make more systematic inroads into Canadian history, but this is another aspect of the book that intrigues me.
