

Book Review

***Sam Steele: A Biography.* By Rod Macleod. University of Alberta Press, 2019. 407 pages.**

Reviewed by Scott Dumonceaux

Rod Macleod's biography of famed North-West Mounted Police (NWMP) officer and military leader Sir Sam Steele is a result of the \$1.8 million purchase of the Sir Samuel Steele Collection by the University of Alberta in 2008. Some 115 linear feet of archival material was transferred to the Bruce Peel Special Collections Library at the University of Alberta. This material, Macleod notes in the book's introduction, includes drafts of Steele's autobiography, his diaries from 1885 to his death in 1919, and, after 1889, lengthy letters to his wife Marie, which, Macleod writes, makes it "possible to reconstruct his life on almost a daily basis" (xv).

The number of significant events in the first fifty years of Canadian history that Steele participated in—the Red River Resistance, the North-West Rebellion, the Klondike gold rush, the Boer War, and the First World War—is remarkable. As Macleod writes, "by the time he died in 1919, he had missed very few of the epic adventures that shaped Canada during the previous fifty years, and had been a leading figure in several of them" (1). But Macleod's focus is on Steele the person and his experiences. He describes Steele as an ambitious man, as is clear throughout the book. Steele "rose high," Macleod writes, "but always, it seemed, with the ultimate prize just beyond his reach" (xv). He was also a committed family man. "From his marriage until the end of his life," Macleod notes, "every major decision he made about his career revolved around their interests" (xiv). Steele often clashed with peers and his political superiors, and blamed them when he failed to achieve his ambitions.

Despite the rich source material available in the Steele Collection, Macleod laments in the first chapter that not much is known about Steele's early life. He was born on January 5, 1848, near Orillia in Simcoe County, Canada West, to parents Elmes Steele and Ann MacIan Macdonald, who was forty-eight years her husband's junior. After his mother's death in 1859, he lived with his half-brother John. Steele joined the militia in 1866 at age sixteen. During the Red River Resistance, he volunteered to join the Wolseley Expedition and marched to Manitoba in 1870. After returning to Ontario, Steele became dissatisfied with the possibilities of advancement in the militia and joined the North-West Mounted Police at its founding in 1873.

Steele marched west with the NWMP during the summer of 1874. Between 1875 and 1885, he was stationed at Swan River, Fort Macleod, Qu'Appelle, Calgary, and Golden, rising to the rank of inspector. During the 1885 North-West Rebellion, Steele formed Steele's Scouts, one of only two groups of the mounted police to take an active part in the rebellion. Steele was rewarded with a promotion to superintendent and was given command of the police detachment at Battleford. There he entered a low point in his career. He considered leaving the force and may have developed a drinking problem. Steele was transferred to Fort Macleod in 1888, where one of the most significant events in his life took place. He met "the love of his life," Marie Harwood (113). The couple were soon engaged and married in Montreal in early 1890. The Steeles spent the next eight years at Fort Macleod, where three children were born, and Steele made a series of unsuccessful mining investments.

As the Klondike gold rush was picking up steam in early 1898, Steele was ordered to the Yukon. He left Vancouver for Skagway in late January, where he remained until the end of March, making observations on the supposed violence there. Steele spent the next five months at Lake Bennett, supervising the rush of miners heading over the Chilkoot and White passes. In September 1898, Steele took command of the police detachment at Dawson City, where he cleaned up many of the administrative problems plaguing the government. Marie considered joining Sam in the Yukon, but eventually decided to move the family to Montreal until Sam's return in October 1899. By that time, Steele had fallen out of favour with Wilfrid Laurier's government and began looking for opportunities outside of the NWMP.

The start of the South African War offered an opportunity to return to the militia. Steele arranged to be appointed commander of Lord Strathcona's Horse. Under Steele's command, the Strathconas arrived in Cape Town in March 1900

and fought the Boers for most of the next year. Following a brief return to Canada, Steele was back in South Africa in 1901 to lead “B” Division of the South African Constabulary. Marie and the children joined him a year later, and he remained with the force until late 1906. Steele returned to the Canadian militia in 1907, where he served in command positions at Calgary and Winnipeg. At the start of the First World War, Steele was promoted to major general and given command of the British Army’s Eastern District. He spent the rest of the war supervising the training of Canadian soldiers in England and lobbying for a promotion to a senior command position. Steele became Sir Sam Steele on January 1, 1918, and reluctantly retired from the army early that year. He died of complications from diabetes in London on January 30, 1919.

Macleod’s focus on Steele and his personal experiences is effectively used to paint a thorough and detailed picture of the man. Throughout the book, Macleod provides succinct, informative background sections on the North-West Rebellion, the Klondike gold rush, the origins of the Boer War, and other topics that will be valuable to the general reader. He often provides discussions of Steele’s relationships with well-known figures he encountered, such as Colonel Garnet Wolseley, NWMP Commissioner L.W. Herchmer, and Minister of Militia Sam Hughes. Unfortunately, Steele’s relationship with those under him often lacks personal details, likely due to source availability. Macleod often puts Steele at the centre of every event he participated in, as is most clear in the Klondike gold rush chapter. It is common for historians to put Steele at the centre of the Klondike story, but a wider analysis of the NWMP role in the gold rush would show that Steele was more of a minor figure than presented here.

Early on in the book, Macleod addresses the challenge of adequately including the perspectives of Indigenous people in the biography of a colonial figure. He notes in the first chapter that Steele’s family settled on land in Simcoe County that had been part of the Lake Simcoe–Lake Huron Purchase of 1815. Macleod makes clear that the NWMP was created to foster the settlement of Western Canada, an end that was “universally regarded” as requiring “the dispossession of the Indigenous peoples” of the region (30). But those looking for a critical analysis of the role of Steele and the NWMP in the colonization of Indigenous Peoples will be disappointed. Macleod doesn’t avoid the topic, but the narrative is largely uncritical, focusing on Steele’s personal experiences and leaving the reader to ponder more difficult questions.

Macleod deserves recognition for sifting through the vast Steele Collection and often difficult-to-read handwritten letters, as this author knows from personal experience. The result is a thorough, if sometimes uncritical, biography of Steele—the person and his experiences—that will be approachable to general readers and valuable to scholars examining the events Steele participated in.

Notes

1. Sir Samuel Steele Collection, *University of Alberta Libraries Bruce Peel Special Collections*, <https://discoverarchives.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/sir-samuel-steele-collection#ref3>

Scott Dumonceaux is a Canada Research Chair in the Study of the Canadian North Postdoctoral Fellow with the School for the Study of Canada at Trent University. He has a PhD in history from the University of Calgary.