

HISTORY AND MEMORY OF THE GREAT WAR:

A Review Essay

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*Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919: Official History of the
Canadian Army in the First World War*

G.W.L. Nicholson, introduction by Mark Osborne Humphries

Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, [1962] 2015.
678 pp. \$65.00 cloth.

The Great War: From Memory to History

Kellen Kurschinski, Steve Marti, Alicia Robinet, Matt Symes,
and Jonathan Vance, editors

Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2015. 438 pp. \$38.99 paper.

*Unwanted Warriors: The Rejected Volunteers of the Canadian
Expeditionary Force*

Nic Clarke

Vancouver: UBC Press, 2015. 256 pp. \$29.95 paper.

THREE BOOKS FROM 2015 deal extensively with both the events of the First World War and Canada's constructed memory of that conflict. G.W.L. Nicholson's *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919: Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War* is a reprint of his classic 1962 volume, produced under the auspices of Canada's federal government. In Nicholson's own words, it is a narrative that shows the part played by Canadian soldiers in the war, "made as factual as possible, recording without embellishment or excessive detail their achievements and disappointments."¹ Six hundred pages of nar-

¹ G.W.L. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919: Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War* (Montreal and Kingston: MQUP, 2015), 533.

rative follow the course of Canada's war from Minister of Militia Sam Hughes's mobilization at Valcartier to Canada's victorious Hundred Days Campaign leading to the Armistice on 11 November 1918. A very different history of the First World War is provided in *The Great War: From Memory to History*, a volume of selected papers presented at an interdisciplinary international conference hosted by Western University over the Remembrance Day weekend in 2011. Edited by a team of conference organizers, this volume offers a modern focus on individual and collective memories of the Great War, authority and ownership relating to the interpretation of past events, and the role of historical revisionism in remembrance and commemoration. Finally, Nic Clarke's *Unwanted Warriors: The Rejected Volunteers of the Canadian Expeditionary Force* features the type of soldier rarely mentioned in official histories, which tend to concentrate on military and political leadership. Clarke examines the service files of thirty-four hundred volunteers who were rejected due to physical or intellectual imperfections. He combines a study of government policies and procedures regarding the medical examination of recruits with an insightful, personal discussion of the consequences of rejection for those deemed "unfit" in an age of eugenics and Social Darwinist emphasis on biological superiority, masculinity, and the duty to serve.² Together, these three books display the changing nature of history, invariably reflecting the society that produces it, and the shaping of the individual and collective memories of a war that changed Canada and British Columbia forever.

Nicholson's *Canadian Expeditionary Force* stands today as the definitive operational account of Canada's overseas role in a war that consumed much of the world's attention from 1914 to 1918. His primary focus is on the Western Front – those static lines of trenches that are so often associated with the conflict. Nicholson's emphasis is on the key battles of Canada's wartime experience: Second Ypres, St. Eloi, Courcellette, Vimy Ridge, Passchendaele, and Canada's Hundred Days. He notes the growing efficiency of the Canadian Corps over the course of the war and, in particular, its transformation into a highly regarded shock formation under the skilled, forceful, and well-organized leadership of that former schoolteacher from Victoria, General Arthur Currie.³ Although Nicholson's emphasis is on military campaigns and leadership, one-third of his chapters deal with the international context and political concerns

² Nic Clarke, *Unwanted Warriors: The Rejected Volunteers of the Canadian Expeditionary Force* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2015), 153.

³ Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force*, 314, 534.

on the home front and at Canada's overseas headquarters in London. The book is very events-oriented and is structured to allow the reader to follow, for example, the front-line experiences of the infantry and mounted rifles battalions raised in British Columbia; however, it should be mentioned that Nicholson does find occasion to express his views on the "chaotic" administration of Minister of Militia Sam Hughes, both at Valcartier and in London, and the failed gambles of Field Marshal Douglas Haig.⁴

In his introduction to this reprint of Nicholson's magnum opus, editor Mark Humphries notes that the first edition (1962) was a product of its time, a simultaneously detailed and authoritative history of military operations and a reflection of the context in which it was written. Canadians in 1962 were no longer tied to "King and Empire" as they had been in 1914 but, instead, were more concerned with conserving Canadian unity as the nation moved towards its centennial and faced rising assertiveness in the province of Quebec. Thus, Humphries notes that Nicholson's 1962 edition is coloured by a sense of retrospective national pride based on the success of the Canadian Corps. Nicholson portrays the Great War as a unifying experience for Canada – a heritage of endurance, self-sacrifice, loyalty, and nationhood – stronger than the divisions over conscription that threatened to tear the country apart along ethnic lines in 1917-18.

Further, Humphries notes that Nicholson's official history was received with near universal acclaim in 1962, both for its scholarship and for its overarching thesis of the Great War as Canada's coming of age:⁵ "Today it can be read as both a source on what happened on the battlefield between 1914 and 1918 and the ways in which Canadians have tried to make sense of that conflict in the decades after the guns finally fell silent. In both respects, it remains an important, indispensable source for understanding Canada's Great War."⁶ It is, therefore, an essential resource in studying both the history and the constructed memory of Canada's Great War.

The writing of Canada's "official history" of the First World War had actually been under way since 1921, when government historian A.F. Duguid began an ultimately futile attempt to assemble the thousands of documents necessary for the work. In his introduction, Humphries explains the work's problematic evolution. Following the war, several

⁴ Ibid., 29, 203-5, 214, 327-30.

⁵ Mark Osborne Humphries, "Introduction to the Carleton Library Series Edition: The Origins of Nicholson's *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919*," in Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force*, xxxi.

⁶ Ibid., xxxv.

Allied nations were similarly assembling their nations' official histories, working under the assumption that their purpose was to analyze wartime events and learn from them. Humphries explains, however, that Duguid was close to Canada's military leaders and unwilling to expose the actions of figures like Arthur Currie, Sam Hughes, or Richard Turner to close scrutiny. Political rivalries and controversies among Canadian leadership were bitter and public in the postwar era; for this reason, Duguid's official history became what Humphries terms "the frontline in the new Canadian war of reputations."⁷ Having promised an eight-volume series, in almost three decades Duguid produced only one volume. The Second World War brought an end to his cumbersome effort, and the official history of the Great War was later assigned to Colonel G.W.L. Nicholson after he had completed the government-sanctioned volume on the Second World War's Italian Campaign. By 1962, the tone of this resurrected "official" history of the Great War in Canada had changed from a straightforward military analysis to an opportunity to provide the general public with an understanding of the political and military complexities of the war.⁸

The chapters in *The Great War: From Memory to History* examine the relationship between recorded history and the construction of memory in several contexts. In "Too Close to History: Major Charles G.D. Roberts, the Canada in Flanders Series, and the Writing of Wartime Documentary," Thomas Hodd extends the story of Canada's official history even further back in time from Duguid's role. Hodd discusses the creation of the Canadian War Records Office in 1916 under Max Aitken's (later Lord Beaverbrook) leadership and Aitken's introduction of a three-volume series, *Canada in Flanders*. Rather than creating a memory of the war, Aitken wanted his series to be motivational – his goal was to promote recruitment. He aimed to inspire, to present a heroic epistle of war. Literal truth was not as important as were narrative episodes of bravery and heroic legend. For this purpose, Aitken recruited literary author and fellow New Brunswicker Charles G.D. Roberts to write the third volume, the purpose of which was to feature the role of Canada's 4th Division at the Somme.⁹ Roberts's role was that of patriotic documentarian. Factual operational history took a back seat to literary

⁷ Ibid., xxi.

⁸ Ibid., xxix.

⁹ Thomas Hodd, "Too Close to History: Major Charles G.D. Roberts, the Canada in Flanders Series, and the Writing of Wartime Documentary," in *The Great War: From Memory to History*, ed. Kellen Kurschinski, Steve Marti, Alicia Robinet, Matt Symes, and Jonathan Vance (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2015), 50.

style and motivational imperialist enthusiasm in this initial foray into an official and commissioned history of the war. Hodd asserts that later military historians marginalized Roberts, treating his work as “little more than a footnote.”¹⁰ Nicholson, for example, does not use Roberts’s volume as a source in *Canadian Expeditionary Force*. So much for the attempt to recruit one of the finest literary figures in Canada to the war effort.

Other chapters deal with Indigenous and French Canadian participation in the war. In “Loyalty and Submission,” Brian MacDowall emphasizes the changing nature of history and memory as a reflection of evolving societal belief. While official discourse from Duncan Campbell Scott, of Canada’s Department of Indian Affairs, emphasizes Aboriginal patriotism, enthusiasm, and a high enlistment rate in the war, MacDowall has gained access to personal letters that show not only that Aboriginal families displayed great reluctance at seeing their sons enlist but also that, “even while in uniform, Indigenous soldiers were seen as Indians first and soldiers second.”¹¹ Similarly, Geoff Keelan shows that English- and French-speaking Canadians have constructed very different memories of war and that these have evolved over time. He examines the role of the 22nd (French Canadian) Battalion and the careers of politicians Henri Bourassa and Talbot Mercer Papineau to reveal why, in the telling of war experience, “creation of historical memory pivots so much on which aspects are emphasized over others.”¹²

Inclusiveness and diversity are aspects of modern Canadian society that have clearly shaped the evolving memory of war. Both Carol Acton’s “Kitchener’s Tourists” and Alice Kelly’s “Can One Grow Used to Death?” advocate the importance of including the experiences of war nurses and Volunteer Aid Detachment personnel. “History involves a selection process that privileges some narratives over others,” notes Acton,¹³ and she and Kelly believe that historians need to end these silences and include non-combatants in Canada’s national narrative by making use of personal, first-hand accounts. Kelly reminds us of how traumatic it was for young women who, even in hospitals and nursing stations behind the lines, witnessed horrendous deaths on a massive scale but were unable to end the suffering. Many came from protected home lives and had had no experience of the working world, let alone the emotional burdens,

¹⁰ Hodd, “Too Close to History,” 38.

¹¹ Brian MacDowall, “Loyalty and Submission: Contested Discourses on Aboriginal War Service, 1914-1939,” in Kurschinski et al., *Great War*, 197.

¹² Geoff Keelan, “The Forgotten Few, Quebec and the Memory of the First World War,” in Kurschinski et al., *Great War*, 246.

¹³ Carol Acton, “Kitchener’s Tourists: Voices from Great War Hospital Ships,” in Kurschinski et al., *Great War*, 217.

lack of guidance, and physical hardships they would suffer while nursing wounded and dying soldiers.¹⁴

Several of the chapters in *The Great War* show that, by reaching mass audiences through film, documentaries, and fiction, the history and memory of war have changed significantly over time. Robert Morley and Mark Connelly discuss the early use of film in collectivizing the experience of war. Morley addresses the popular impact of the “cinematic flyer-hero” portrayed by stars such as David Niven, Errol Flynn, Cary Grant, and Basil Rathbone, with producers such as Howard Hughes.¹⁵ Connelly examines the production of high-quality British documentaries as a way of combatting the heavily financed Hollywood version of American dominance in bringing about victory. Popular film “transformed a trip to the cinema into something beyond entertainment and into an act of remembrance – just as a visitor to the battlefields was not a tourist, but a ‘pilgrim.’”¹⁶ In “The Great War and Detective Fiction,” Marzena Sokolowska-Paryz examines thirty-five novels written during the past twenty years that use the Great War as a setting for murder mysteries. The morality of war and killing is an overarching theme that runs through these works, creating a social and political “re-reading” of the conflict through contemporary ethical conventions. The “truth” of the Great War, she argues, depends on the author, time period, and intended audience.¹⁷

Those studying British Columbia’s history in the First World War can benefit from the personalized approaches advocated in *The Great War*. For example, in *Battlefront Nurses in WWI*, Maureen Duffus addresses the horrid working conditions faced by graduates of the Royal Jubilee Hospital and St. Joseph’s Hospital, both in Victoria, and Vancouver General Hospital while serving in Salonika during the Mediterranean campaign.¹⁸ Barry Gough’s *From Classroom to Battlefield* provides moving profiles of former students and teachers (including Arthur Currie) of Victoria High School who served in the war. Of the almost five hundred soldiers sent to the Western Front, three teachers and eighty-

¹⁴ Alice Kelly, “Can One Grow Used to Death?: Deathbed Scenes in Great War Nurses’ Narratives,” in Kurschinski et al., *Great War*, 343.

¹⁵ Robert Morley, “Ask Him if He’ll Drink a Toast to the Dead’: The Cinematic Flyer-Hero and British Memories of the Great War in the Air, 1927–39,” in Kurschinski et al., *Great War*, 381.

¹⁶ Mark Connelly, “*The Battles of Coronel and Falkland Islands (1927)* and the Struggle for the Cinematic Image of the Great War,” in Kurschinski et al., *Great War*, 307, 320.

¹⁷ Marzena Sokolowska-Paryz, “The Great War in Detective Fiction,” in Kurschinski et al., *Great War*, 80, 95.

¹⁸ Maureen Duffus, *Battlefront Nurses in WWI: The Canadian Medical Corps in England, France and Salonika, 1914–1919* (Victoria: Town and Gown Press, 2009).

three students from Victoria High School died on the fields of France and Flanders.¹⁹ Regimental histories, including *Swift and Strong* of the 7th Battalion (1st British Columbia Regiment); *For King and Country* of the 47th Battalion out of New Westminster; and *The 2nd Canadian Mounted Rifles* (British Columbia Horse) are all based on personal diaries, memoirs, or photo collections from the war.²⁰ In *From the West Coast to the Western Front*, a collection gathered from listeners of CBC Radio One's *BC Almanac*, Mark Forsythe and Greg Dickson include chapters concerning many of those "silenced voices" addressed in *The Great War*, including Aboriginal soldiers, war nurses, families of the home front, soldiers of cultural minorities, conscientious objectors, and those living in British Columbia's internment camps.²¹

Scholarly attention has also shifted recently to other excluded or overlooked groups in which Nicholson, for example, had no interest. In *Unwanted Warriors*, Nic Clarke provides a detailed account of the men who were rejected during their medical fitness examinations at recruiting centres or training depots of the Canadian Expeditionary Force. More than forty-three hundred volunteers were turned away, most commonly for issues relating to eyesight, dental difficulties, hearing problems, or flat feet. Clarke outlines the structure and policies that, at the beginning of the war, created the categories of "fit" and "unfit," and he notes how the former was gradually broadened to include those who might serve as battalion cooks, foresters, clerks, or in other capacities that did not require the same level of fitness as was required of those who served in the infantry. Emphasizing the impact of rejection on the volunteer and his family, Clarke explains: "This approach is informed by, reflects, and builds on public and academic interest in the 'roots level' experience of the Great War. Over the last thirty years, historians have increasingly turned away from the halls of power and blood-soaked frontline trenches to the streets, alleys, and hearths of the homefront in a concerted effort to discover how societies of belligerent nations were transformed by their experience of war."²² One such rejected recruit (not noted by Clarke)

¹⁹ Barry Gough, *From Classroom to Battlefield: Victoria High School and the First World War* (Victoria: Heritage House, 2014), 189.

²⁰ Robert M. Harley, ed., *For King and Country: 150 Years of the Royal Westminster Regiment* (New Westminster: Vivalogue, 2012); Ron Leblanc, Keith Maxwell, Dwayne Snow, Kelly Dechènes, *Swift and Strong: The British Columbia Regiment (Duke of Connaught's Own): A Pictorial History* (Vancouver: The British Columbia Regiment [Duke of Connaught's Own] Museum Society, 2011); G. Chalmers Johnston, *The 2nd Canadian Mounted Rifles (British Columbia Horse) in France and Flanders 1914-1919* (Ottawa: CEF Books, [1931] 2003).

²¹ Mark Forsythe and Greg Dickson, *From the West Coast to the Western Front: British Columbians and the Great War* (Madeira Park: Harbour Publishing, 2014).

²² Clarke, *Unwanted Warriors*, 9-10.

was Noel Peters of Prince Rupert, who suffered a nervous breakdown attributed to the bullying he suffered after having been rejected due to an intellectual disability. Later in the war, as recruiting standards were loosened, Peters was able to sign up for a forestry battalion.²³ For many rejected volunteers, however, the label “shirker” or “slacker” could not be shaken off, bringing great shame both to the men and to their families.

An acceptable height was also a criterion of acceptance. In 1914, the requirement for service in the Canadian Expeditionary Force was set at five feet, three inches (160 centimetres), but, as casualties mounted, Canadian military authorities adjusted policies to widen the pool of recruits. Local “Pals’ Battalions” were then raised throughout the country, including the 143rd “Bantam Battalion” from British Columbia. The height requirement was set at five feet, one and one-half inches (156 centimetres) for the members of this unit. Upon reaching England in 1917, they were transferred to the 24th Reserve Battalion and later became reinforcements for units, including British Columbia’s 47th Battalion and the 2nd Canadian Mounted Rifles.²⁴

Shame was experienced for a multitude of reasons in Canadian communities during the war. In “The Enemy at Home,” in *The Great War*, Mary Chaktsiris describes the enemy aliens of Ontario, immigrants or naturalized British subjects, most of whom were descended from German or Austrian families. Even though German Canadians were often well-established employers, retailers, or workers in local communities, it was not enough to protect them from blind suspicion, harassment, and persecution under wartime conditions. Chaktsiris points out that there was little room for “enemies” in national narratives of Canada’s war.²⁵ Also speaking of German Canadians, historian Peter Moogk echoes Chaktsiris’s sentiments in his work on the situation in British Columbia. Moogk maintains that, although government provisions for dealing with enemy aliens seemed quite reasonable, their application by panicked citizens became increasingly harsh and punitive. As he concludes: “The stress of war brings out the best and worst in human beings.”²⁶

When it comes to Canada’s memory of war, the most “unwanted” were the soldiers “shot at dawn.” In *The Great War*, Bette London’s

²³ Sam McBride, *The Bravest Canadian: Fritz Peters, VC – The Making of a Hero in Two World Wars* (Vancouver: Granville Island Publishing, 2012), 24, 28, 58.

²⁴ Sandra Sauer Ratch, “Do Your Little Bit: The 143rd Battalion Canadian Expeditionary Force, ‘BC Bantams,’” *BC Studies* 182 (Summer 2014): 176.

²⁵ Mary G. Chaktsiris, “Defining Enemy Aliens in Ontario during the Great War,” in Kurshinski et al., *Great War*, 296.

²⁶ Peter Moogk, “Uncovering the Enemy within: British Columbians and the German Menace,” *BC Studies* 182 (Summer 2014): 45, 50.

“The Names of the Dead” notes the shame attached to the twenty-three Canadian soldiers executed for desertion. Their families were not given full details of their situations, and their names were not listed either on Canada’s memorial monuments or in the *Book of Remembrance* located in the Peace Tower on Ottawa’s Parliament Hill.²⁷ Court martial records contain limited information, but three of the executed men were from BC battalions.²⁸ One of them was encountered by Lieutenant George Godwin of the 29th (Vancouver) Battalion, who was ashamed to have been assigned to guard duty over a prisoner sentenced to be shot the next morning: “And there, sitting like a cornered animal, in terror [was] the face of the deserter . . . And over there, in British Columbia, on the swift rivers or in the great mountains, such little men as this were living, free and happy.”²⁹ The family of Noel Peters, mentioned above, had lost two sons in the 7th (1st BC) Battalion battles at St. Julien and Mount Sorrel, but the family, including Distinguished Service Order winner Fritz Peters, was devastated when a cousin, Eric Poole, was shot at dawn. Dazed and confused by shell shock, Poole had wandered off, failed to return to duty, and was then shot for desertion. Fritz Peters wrote to his own mother, “Death is nothing compared to dishonour,” and family correspondence never again mentions Poole’s name.³⁰ London outlines how views on deserters changed over time. From feeling shame and dishonour, Canadians eventually began to feel sadness and anger that these men, all of whom had been volunteers, had been executed, often for the purpose of enforcing discipline, while at the same time many Canadian men managed to avoid enlistment and (later) conscription. By 2001, public opinion had changed to the extent that the Canadian government provided a blanket pardon for those executed for desertion, and the twenty-three names were entered into the *Book of Remembrance*.³¹

Today Vimy stands as the most important Canadian memory of the Great War. In history it was the battle at which Canadians fought together for the first time as the Canadian Corps, with all four divisions brought together to win a victory that helped change the course of the

²⁷ Bette London, “‘Shot at Dawn’ and the Politics of Remembrance,” in Kurschinski et al., *The Great War*, 174.

²⁸ A.B. Godefroy, *For Freedom and Honour? The Story of 25 Canadian Volunteers Executed in the Great War* (Nepean, ON: CEF Books, 1998), 84–88. The three men were Private Henry Kerr, 7th (British Columbia) Battalion, Private Thomas Moles, 54th (Kootenay) Battalion, and Private John W. Roberts, 2nd Canadian Mounted Rifles.

²⁹ George Godwin, *Why Stay We Here? Odyssey of a Canadian Officer in World War I* (Victoria: Godwin Books [1930], 2002), 148.

³⁰ McBride, *Bravest Canadian*, 44, 60. Fritz Peters won the Victoria Cross in a later action in the Second World War.

³¹ London, “Shot at Dawn,” 177.

war. Following rigorous planning and preparations, Canadians took Vimy Ridge from between 9 and 13 April 1917. One hundred thousand Canadians fought in this battle, which resulted in over ten thousand casualties, thirty-six hundred of them fatal. In a forty-page chapter, Nicholson's *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919* provides us with a detailed official history of the battle. The Vimy operation remains a classic example of a swift and sustained assault against a strongly entrenched enemy, and it demonstrates the powerful and efficient weapon that the Canadian Corps had become.³²

History, understood and adapted by society over time, evolves into collective memory. Mark Facknitz's article on commemoration and mourning in *The Great War* explains how important the Vimy Memorial, in the Pas-de-Calais in northern France, is to Canada's memory of the war. That memorial provided dignity in death; it consolidated and expressed the national trauma at the same time as it provided a site and a space for private contemplation and grief.³³ Over time, Vimy also came to represent Canadian unity, with many Canadians believing that Canada matured as a nation in the Great War. This victory in 1917, in Canada's fiftieth year since Confederation, came to symbolize Canada's coming of age not in historical fact but, rather, in constructed national memory. In the words of Jonathan Vance, an editor of *The Great War*: "All of the values that Allied propaganda had emphasized during the war remained sacrosanct in Canada's collective memory afterwards – freedom, liberty, justice, democracy, truth, humanity."³⁴ On Vimy Ridge Day in 2012, Dean Oliver of the Vimy Foundation brought history and memory together in his address at the French Embassy in Ottawa: Vimy is "unique, unalloyed, and unparalleled in our commemoration of the nation's military past."³⁵ A national myth was born in battle and became steeped in legend, a way for Canadians to "make meaning" of a long and bitter war filled with loss. As Oliver concludes: "Vimy became a shorthand narrative for the war. It still is."³⁶ In Vimy, Canadian official history and personal memory merged.

³² Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force*, 267.

³³ Mark A.R. Facknitz, "Kitsch, Commemoration, and Mourning in the Aftermath of the Great War," in Kurschinski et al., *Great War*, 362.

³⁴ Jonathan Vance, "Remembering Armageddon," in *Canada and the First World War: Essays in Honour of Robert Craig Brown*, ed. David Mackenzie (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 415.

³⁵ Dean F. Oliver, "Vimy Ridge Day, 2012," *Canadian Military History* 21, 3 (2012): 49.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.