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Hell Upon Earth: A Personal Account of Prince Edward Island Soldiers in the Great War, 1914–1918 [Review]

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Hell Upon Earth

J. Clinton Morrison, Jr., *Hell Upon Earth: A Personal Account of Prince Edward Island Soldiers in the Great War, 1914-1918*. Privately published (available from the author, 157 Victoria Rd., Summerside, PEI, C1N 2G6), 1995, 359pp (ISBN 0-9691824-1-4)

A Prince Edward Islander who enlisted for service in the First World War had a worse than a one in three chance of coming home unscathed. Some 4,000 joined up over the course of the war, and over 1,500 were killed, wounded, missing, or captured. These numbers are even more impressive when it is noted that PEI was the only province which did not send an intact battalion to the front. Though the Island sent two siege batteries to the front, its only infantry battalion, the 105th, got as far as England before being broken up for reinforcements. It is somehow fitting, then, that these soldiers, scattered as they were throughout the Canadian Expeditionary Force, should have their experiences brought together in this fine book.

Hell Upon Earth tells the story of the soldiers through the letters they wrote home, and through interviews the author conducted with the few surviving Island veterans. The book is divided into two sections. The first is a chronological examination of the war, with the letters and recollections set against the backdrop of the larger war. The second section is thematic, and examines the soldiers' experiences through the eyes of Islanders. In both sections, Morrison has provided just enough background material to give the context and to tie the letters together into a very readable narrative.

The book is filled with quite striking passages, like Bert Duvar's candid admission in May 1915 that "I have had enough of Salisbury Plain to last me a couple of lifetimes at least," or Parker Crockett's lament that the war was very different than their training had led them to believe and that "instead of fighting men alone we have to fight machinery of the very latest and most deadly kinds." There are also plenty of those almost inconsequential episodes which obviously made a very deep impression on those men who lived

through them. Joseph Managhan of the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry wrote to his father that he had borrowed a box of matches from a pal to light his pipe, but when he turned around to give them back seconds later the man was dead.

Of course, some readers might quibble over the use of letters as a main source. Whether they were written to loved ones or published in newspapers (as many of these were), one might expect them to be overly rosy, patriotic, and bracing. Yet they are none of these things, thanks to Morrison's obvious care in selecting them. The letters he has chosen have an immediacy and ring of truth that makes them utterly convincing, and indeed the reader will marvel at the frank comments which not only passed the censors but were considered suitable for publication in newspapers.

There are occasions when the author has too readily taken the letters at face value. For example, he accepts too easily the hatred of Canadian soldiers for the Germans that was a feature of so many letters. It now seems clear that there was little personal animosity between individual soldiers on either side of no-man's-land, who were more likely to take a 'live and let live' attitude. In this case, Morrison has read too much into comments that were more likely made and published for propaganda purposes. Nevertheless, such misinterpretations are few, and one cannot help but agree with the author's claim that in general the book "accurately depicts the various aspects of the war as experienced by PEI soldiers who went overseas."

Clinton Morrison is a noted local historian who embarked upon this research in part as a tribute to his father, an airman during the Second World War. It is also a fitting tribute to Island soldiers of an earlier war. Assiduously researched and engagingly written, *Hell Upon Earth* deserves a wide readership.

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