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Review of "One in a Thousand: The Life and Death of Captain Eddie McKay, Royal Flying Corps" by Graham Broad

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Graham Broad. *One in a Thousand: The Life and Death of Captain Eddie McKay, Royal Flying Corps*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017. Pp. 171.

“Glory is fleeting, but obscurity is forever.” This quote, often attributed to Napoléon Bonaparte, is flawed. Or at least flawed in part. Graham Broad’s *One in a Thousand: The Life and Death of Captain Eddie McKay, Royal Flying Corps* demonstrates that historians have the power to save lives from obscurity. It also argues convincingly that the methods they use to do so are sound.

One in a Thousand is not just a biography of an accomplished First World War scout pilot and ace, one of Canada’s “Knights of the Air.” It is three books in one: a microhistory of the subject’s life and death, a useful introduction to historical research methods, and a commentary on the philosophy of history. Broad organises each of his chapters in two parts. The former offers a narrative of part of McKay’s life while the latter provides a commentary on the methods the author used to construct the chapter and an examination of the historical philosophy behind those methods. This review will reflect this approach by taking the narrative and commentaries in turn.

Alfred Edwin “Eddie” McKay lived a short but exciting life. Broad admits that very few sources remain to reconstruct McKay’s early life. Census records and newspapers, coupled with what is known about his family and the values of the era, suggest that sports were his real passion. He was a student and varsity athlete at the University of Western Ontario in London. McKay joined the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) in early 1916 after receiving his aviation certificate from the Wright Brothers School of Aviation in Dayton, Ohio and Augusta, Georgia. He proceeded overseas and underwent military flying training in the spring of 1916—training that was improving faster than many historians relying on postwar memoirs give it credit for. Eddie was appointed scout pilot (a First World War term for fighter pilot) and sent to France where he waited for a vacancy in an operational squadron.

Second Lieutenant McKay joined No. 24 Squadron (flying De Havilland scout DH.2 pusher biplanes) just days after the opening of the Battle of the Somme. Broad expertly captures the nature of air fighting on the Western Front, using the experiences of McKay and other pilots to give the reader a sense of what it was like. He reminds us that while McKay was a scout pilot, shooting down the

enemy was only a means to an end. In 1916, armies relied on the airplane to provide intelligence on the enemy's positions and troop movements. Major-General Hugh Trenchard, head of the RFC, used his aircraft aggressively during the summer. While other historians have criticised this approach, Broad notes that Trenchard's tactics allowed pilots like McKay to shield observer planes and keep the German observers away from British lines.

McKay's first tour included an incident that made him Canada's first famous military pilot. On 28 October 1916, in a fight with McKay and other 24 Squadron machines, leading German flying ace Oswald Boelcke was killed in a collision with another German aircraft. Although McKay never claimed Boelcke's death as his victory, the Canadian media, especially local newspapers like the *London Advertiser* and the *London Free Press*, did. The fact that McKay never claimed the victory, which was described in close relation to his achievements on the rugby pitch, only "reinforced his knightly virtues" (p. 85). This is a real strength of Broad's work. He uses incidents in McKay's life to give the reader a fuller understanding of the era's cultural attitudes and practices. The idea that glory was fleeting is well-supported by McKay's life. He was never decorated for his wartime exploits and he never again obtained recognition on this scale.

McKay's first tour ended in March 1917, and he was sent back to the United Kingdom as an instructor. Broad notes that few details about his time as an instructor survive. What we do know is that he managed to get a lot of flying under his belt and that he made the choice to return to France for a second tour. Now a captain, McKay joined No. 23 Squadron (flying SPAD VIIIs and later SPAD XIIIIs) as a flight leader. Aircraft were more powerful and deadlier than even the year before, especially in the hands of a pilot of McKay's experience. From late October to the end of December 1917 he was credited with twice the number of victories over German aircraft than anyone in the squadron. Captain McKay's life came to a tragic end one day after his twenty-fifth birthday. He was last seen by members of his flight on 28 December 1917 attacking a two-seater. Over a month later, a German aircraft dropped a note confirming the young Canadian aviator's death.

Readers may come for the story of Eddie McKay, but Broad leaves them with a better understanding of the methods he used to construct the narrative and the theory underlying those methods. He

begins by offering a definition of history: "history happens when we prove a claim. Proving it, in turn, is largely a question of assessing sources, deriving facts from them, and using those facts as evidence for the stories we want to tell or the arguments we want to make" (p. xxx). This definition emphasises the historian's skill at source criticism. By improving this skill (among others), we make better historians and write better history.

Broad uses the example of his chapter on McKay's first twenty-one years to show that facts sometimes change in the face of new evidence. He lays bare the building blocks of history—mainly the process behind assessing sources. Sources contain errors, but historians can detect these errors using methods like triangulation, where multiple sources are used to verify facts, or at the very least probabilities. In the next chapter, Broad uses an article in the *London Advertiser* as a case study in interrogating his sources. He also shows that while a source may be unreliable for establishing certain facts, it may still be useful to scholars with a different question in mind.

At the end of the chapter featuring McKay's engagement with Boelcke, Broad offers his readers another practical exercise. Using a process of elimination, the author uncovers the identity of the writer behind a squadron diary. This effectively highlights the iterative nature of the historian's process and reminds us that even our sources have sources.

Broad uses the opportunity afforded by McKay's death to examine R.G. Collingwood's ideas about how historians can re-enact the thinking processes of past actors in their own minds.¹ Broad notes that while we can never completely get into an historical actor's shoes, Collingwood's ideas around asking intelligent questions about what historical actors were thinking and removing hindsight from our historical analyses are valuable contributions to the discipline.

In the final chapter Broad addresses the ethical dimension of the historian's practice. He only discovered that Eddie McKay's logbook survived midway through his research and writing process. Without this logbook, a brief anecdote Broad had hoped to use to illustrate McKay's initiation to the squadron would have been appropriate had he indicated that the pilot in question was probably Eddie, but that he could not know for sure. The discovery of the logbook, however, showed that Eddie had not been the pilot from the anecdote. Broad

¹ R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), 215.

notes that had he published before finding the logbook this would have been an honest mistake. However, had he gone ahead and attributed the anecdote to McKay even after the new evidence came forward, this would have been unethical. This is important because, as Broad reminds us (in an era characterised by a proliferation of fake news and misinformation), the truth still matters “because if all that matters is good storytelling, then it hardly matters if the story is true or not” (p. 144). The discipline would collapse if we accepted the postmodernist supposition that there is no objective historical truth and that every claim has equal merit. As Broad has demonstrated, an evidence-based approach allows the historian to rescue Eddie McKay’s life from obscurity with a reasonable margin of error.

If I were to offer one criticism, it would be the absence of a reflective analysis on how Professor Broad and his students went about commemorating Captain Eddie McKay. This would have made the book even more useful to students of public history or heritage professionals, whose work often straddles the line between history and commemoration. He might have also considered explaining how he uses McKay’s story in the classroom to teach the First World War. Yet what Broad has included offers many helpful insights for students of history. It will make an exceptional course text for any undergraduate or graduate historical methods or historiography course. Although aviation, military, and war and society historians will find the examples used pertinent to their work, historians of other subjects will also find *One in a Thousand* an invaluable learning tool. Few history books tell us a compelling story and teach us to be better historians so effectively.

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