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Review of "Engaging the Line: How the Great War Shaped the Canada-US Border" by Brandon R. Dimmel

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Brandon R. Dimmel. *Engaging the Line: How the Great War Shaped the Canada-US Border*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2016. Pp. 242.

The recent border escalations over immigration and national security have brought greater attention to situating North American political boundaries in historical context. Brandon Dimmel's *Engaging the Line* offers a timely reconsideration of the Canada-United States boundary during the critical period of the First World War and deliberates over some of the key debates in border and transnational history.¹ Like other histories of the Canadian home front, Dimmel argues that every Canadian community had its own wartime experiences and applies this argument to the historical relationships which bound together three sets of communities across the Canada-US border.² Focusing on Windsor, Ontario and Detroit, Michigan; St. Stephen, New Brunswick and Calais, Maine; and White Rock, British Columbia and Blaine, Washington, Dimmel argues that whether wartime border initiatives were embraced or resisted depended on a number of historical, demographic and geographic conditions. Relying on newspapers, national and municipal records and census data collected from these communities, *Engaging the Line* demonstrates that the application of increased border administration varied from region to region and that, at least in part because of the reactions of local residents, regulations were in no way uniformly implemented on the southern border.

Each pair of settlements receive their own section with chapters breaking down the local background, transnational relationship and border administration between the communities throughout the war

¹ Bruno Ramirez, *Crossing the 49th Parallel: Migration from Canada to the United States, 1900-1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); Emmanuel Brunet-Jailly, *Borderlands: Comparing Border Security in North America and Europe* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa, 2007); and Benjamin Johnson and Andrew Graybill, eds., *Bridging National Borders in North America: Transnational and Comparative Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

² Ian Miller, *Our Glory and Our Grief: Torontonians and the Great War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002); Paul Rutherford, *Hometown Horizons* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2004); James Pitsula, *For All We Have and Are: Regina and the Experience of the Great War* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2008); Jim Blanchard, *Winnipeg's Great War: A City Comes of Age* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2010); and Jonathan Vance, *A Township at War* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2018).

period. The case studies help to showcase the shared experiences of border communities. They mutually participated in sports, travel and leisure events, which included baseball, football, parades, horseracing and beach, fairground and camping trips. Later in the war, organisations like the Imperial Reserve, Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire and the Red Cross assisted in funding and recruiting on either side of the boundary. In Eastern and Central Canada, communities on either side of the border tended to have longer and better-established relationships, similar demographic makeups and closer economic integration, which meant that measures to harden the border were often interpreted by locals as interference by meddling federal and provincial powers. Other communities, especially newer settlements in Western Canada, encouraged efforts to strengthen the border to protect from perceived threats.

Beginning with Windsor and Detroit, Dimmel offers a brief account of early French settlement, the British conquest and the arrival of Irish, German and Eastern European immigrants to the cities and surrounding areas. This shared history of immigration and rapid industrial development before the war led to significant overlap between the two populations, leading at least one resident to remark that “Windsor is, except politically, part and parcel of the city of Detroit” (p. 52). Before the completion of the Ambassador Bridge, several ferries allowed the tenth of residents residing or working on the opposing side of the river to cross the border easily. The introduction of border agents in 1908 and the adoption of passport checks and searches during the war years to regulate border movement were designed to restrict economic competition and the flow of “undesirables,” who were often defined by race. Of special interest is the inclusion of writings by W.D. Scott, the Canadian Superintendent of Immigration stationed in Windsor, as an excellent primary source which allows Dimmel to present first-hand accounts of border crossing experiences.

Although much smaller communities, the residents of St. Stephen and Calais made concerted efforts to retain their cross-border culture and connections. Located in the St. Croix Valley, the two cities shared a number of traditional industries like fishing, farming, soap making and timbering, as well as sharing some emergency services and important festivities like Dominion Day and the Fourth of July. When the war arrived, border tensions between the two cities were mild and, even with the federal escalation of security, border guards

tried to show leniency and act in the best interests of the local populace. So much was this the case that by the last year of the war customs investigators had arrived in St. Stephen to ensure federal standards were being maintained.

White Rock, a resort town for beach-going Vancouverites, and Blaine, a small industrial town, shared close proximity and, unlike Dimmel's other case studies, had no natural barriers between them. But this came at a cost as, only a few years before the war began, their relationship was sullied by a combination of liquor trafficking, the pollution of Semiahmoo Bay with salmon offal from Blaine's canneries and the construction of a railroad along White Rock's promenade by an American manufacturer. Dimmel also argues the relationship was exacerbated by American neutrality and apparently did not improve with the entrance of the US into the conflict in 1917. White Rock residents' fears of Asian immigration and enemy aliens led to less resistance against a stronger border, though this did not prevent people attempting to be smuggled across by train or ship.

Engaging the Line has several limitations which must be addressed directly. While Dimmel emphasises the impact of heightened security measures at border crossings, his examples suggest that, in practice, customs control measures were employed as a selective and arbitrary deterrence rather than part of thorough and routine investigations. More seriously, his reliance on three case studies to make broad conclusions about the evolution of border security risks too easily inferring border generalities. As the primary evidence collected for the study is drawn from local archives and newspaper editorials, *Engaging the Line* offers limited findings on the effects of provincial and federal border policies outside of its regional case studies, especially in Québec and the Prairie provinces. These issues are compounded by the need for greater evidential scepticism and unverifiable claims that local newspapers "reflected the political attitudes of the majority" (p. 156). Another concern is that, while making a few brief mentions to local industries, Dimmel primarily restricts his study to human traffic crossing the border without taking into account how unparalleled levels of war materials transported between Canada and the United States at busier crossings in Ontario and Québec accelerated the practice of fluid economic exchange just as border populations began to face heightened security restrictions. Lastly, Indigenous perspectives and the role of American border

authorities could also have been incorporated to extend the study's boundaries further.

With so much attention on North American immigration today, *Engaging the Line* is a fitting addition to current border and home front histories and will assist in furthering debates on how border security between Canada and the United States during the critical period of the First World War has shaped, and continues to shape, the two countries' bilateral relationship. Border communities' responses to the tightening of border security ranged from shock to indifference, but the willingness of locals to embrace new security measures often had a marked impact on shaping the irregular application of border policy. Although readers should harbour a few concerns about the methodology and some of the newspaper sources' credibility, its account of local histories is rewarding and recommended for historians and those looking to gain better insight into the actions of Canada's border authorities during the First World War.

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