

2020

Review of "From the Klondike to Berlin: The Yukon in World War I" by Michael Gates

Ellen A. Ahlness

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Recommended Citation

Ahlness, Ellen A. "Review of "From the Klondike to Berlin: The Yukon in World War I" by Michael Gates." *Canadian Military History* 29, 1 (2020)

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Book Reviews



Michael Gates. *From the Klondike to Berlin: The Yukon in World War I*. Madeira Park, BC: Lost Moose, 2017. Pp. 267.

A historian's goal should be to find a story that has not been told, or to find an old story and tell it through a new lens. In answering the former, Yukon author-journalist Michael Gates provides a comprehensive account of his home territory's role in Canada's First World War effort in *From the Klondike to Berlin: The Yukon in World War I*. In terms of manpower and funds, the Yukon contributed to the war effort at higher than national average rates, yet Gates identifies a serious gap in academic and trade literature in failing to report on the territory's contributions.

The structure of the book is straightforward, progressing chronologically through events predating Canada's entrance into the war, through the war, and the immediate aftermath. Gates' account follows individuals and the Yukon Company—a unit comprised primarily of conscripts and volunteers from the Yukon—year by year, looking at developments and cataclysmic events both in the Yukon and on the European front. Periodically, the book dedicates a lengthy section or entire chapter to influential or notable individuals from the Yukon, chronicling their activities and contributions to the war effort. In these detailed accounts, Gates glorifies the exploits of regional folk legends, including Martha Black, Marie Fotheringham, Robert Service, Jim Christie, George Black, and Joe Boyle. These accounts (which are arguably the most engrossing parts of the book) contain full, if rosy, portraits of their exploits both before and during the war.

Gates seeks to highlight unique phenomena and characteristics of the Yukon and its peoples during the First World War. These unique features include the financial and physical commitments of Yukon communities to the war effort; the skills soldiers took to the

battlefield drawn from local hunting, trapping, and mining industry experiences; and the way communities back home recognised the sacrifices of those who died.

The book is divided into four chronological sections: “1914-1916,” “1917,” “1917-1918,” and “1919 and Beyond.” In the first period, Gates captures the era’s spirit of nationalism with songs, poetry, and details of the Yukon’s (and indeed country’s) high spirits and excitement to fight. A short section details the challenges of minorities and Indigenous peoples in enlisting as they confronted systemic barriers and prejudices. The narrative weaves between the establishment of the Yukon Infantry Company to individuals, families and communities.

Through the second period and beyond, Gates makes readers sympathise and identify with individual losses and deaths. Some individuals enter and exit the narrative, sometimes disappearing just long enough to fall to the back of the reader’s mind before they re-emerge. This presents problems as the narrative moves into 1917, as it becomes harder to tell whether the battles detailed involved the Yukon Company or are part of telling the story of certain individuals. The focus on individuals means that the account is frequently detail-heavy in a way that does not just look at life in the trenches but gives a more comprehensive story of actors of all social classes. This lens also allows Gates to discuss the short- and long-term consequences of the war on its participants and the territory, such as when he walks the reader through the Yukon after the war, explaining how and why the population of the region shrank in the following decade. This means that the horror of the First World War is not so much chronicled as implied and read through the reactions and experiences of the individuals followed.

As the book progresses through the war in the third and fourth sections, it situates wartime developments in relation to domestic Canadian events, such as the temperance movement, the flu pandemic, and immigration. This brings attention to the role of civilians in the war effort, including individuals who, at the time, would have had their actions minimised because of their gender or class, including the notable Mrs. Martha Black. Having gone to England in 1916 to travel with her husband, Colonel George Black, Martha Black was simultaneously a representative of the Yukon, Canada, and suffragists. Gates uses Martha Black’s experiences to draw comparisons between Canadian and English social and political norms, as well as to showcase how Yukoners represented their territory abroad.

Given how consistently detail-heavy Gates strives to be (an impressive endeavour that reflects commitment to archival research and first-person account ethics), it is surprising to see practically no discussion of Indigenous peoples in the book, with references to Indigenous efforts limited to three instances. Even more surprising is a lack of discussion detailing this minimal attention. The introduction would have been an ideal place to bring up any challenges in researching the involvement of Indigenous peoples, especially as this is where Gates discusses challenges in using incomplete military records.

Stepping back from the individual sections, the book's divided periods come together to create a narrative built on an examination of Yukon residents' wartime experiences overseas and on the home front. Yet even as the narrative flows smoothly, there is still space to answer some questions. What did Yukon communities know of wartime conditions beyond general speculation and fundraising to support "the boys"? What fostered the growth of discontent and disillusionment with the war in the Yukon during later years? Gates occasionally discusses growing disillusionment on a broad scale, but these descriptions seem to act only as signposts to signal the final months of the war.

While Gates' approach to examining the First World War is bottom-up, focusing on the role of the individual using several case studies, this choice nonetheless raises questions: why use an individual tracing strategy? What were broader sentiments and how did larger groups of people play into the development of these sentiments? While Gates makes no promises to answer these questions, one is still aware of the significance and influence of these broader structures.

Gates explains that the seeds of *From the Klondike to Berlin* came from the realisation that for all the knowledge about certain parts of the Yukon's history, little is known about its peoples' involvement in the First World War. The end product is above and beyond that of a simple resource on the Yukon. Gates paints a comprehensive picture that also clarifies the role of the Yukon and puts together sparse and hidden information into one full story.

In the preface, Gates clearly outlines the source materials he drew from in his undertaking, including published letters, military records, both local and Alaskan newspapers, and secondary sources. He shares the challenges of getting data from the navy and air force (in terms of both quantity and quality), though the Canadian Expeditionary Force was an excellent resource. The reader is left with the impression

that the diaries of two units primarily made up of Yukon enlistees were some of the biggest boons as they provided records of day-to-day activities. By discussing the fallacies and failings of records to illustrate the complications of recording and studying the Yukon, Gates complicates the region and presents a case for why a study of this period and region is important.

From the Klondike to Berlin comes highly recommended for anyone seeking to deepen their regional knowledge or fill gaps in their familiarity with the First World War. The content may serve as an in-depth reference material for regional scholars, historians, and political scientists. *From the Klondike to Berlin* will appeal to Canadian military scholars in particular, as well as military scholars interested in the European theatre more broadly. Additionally, those who study rural communities and provinces in great power conflicts will find this a worthwhile read. While the writing is accessible for undergraduate students as well, the subject matter relies on a degree of regional and period knowledge that not all undergraduates may hold, making the book a better fit for readers with solid foundational knowledge. For researchers and general interest readers, this book is an excellent example of scholarship and storytelling combined.

ELLEN A. AHLNESS, *UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON*