

Jonathan F. Vance. *A Township At War*. Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2018. Pp. 308.

The centenary of the First World War encouraged people of many nations to dive back into their family and local archives to try to understand what transpired in their areas of the globe during that great conflagration. National events of remembrance often occur at the local level, as the populace contemplate the sacrifices of their ancestors. Jonathan F. Vance's 2018 publication, *A Township At War*, permits readers to zoom in on Vance's hometown of Waterdown and the surrounding area to understand the impact of the First World War on the men and women of East Flamborough.

Recent histories have examined the ordinary Canadians who served during the conflict. Tim Cook's *The Secret History Of Soldiers: How Canadians Survived the Great War* allowed readers to experience the impact of the struggle upon the ordinary person on the ground.<sup>1</sup> Robert Rutherford's *Hometown Horizons: Local Responses to Canada's Great War* has also taken a local approach to the war, but what Vance provides is a more intimate portrayal through the lens of one small area of Ontario.<sup>2</sup> What makes *A Township At War* different is the unceasing determination to showcase just how much one township in one province can be altered by a war taking place thousands of miles away. Vance wishes to place the reader into rural areas of Canada to see the changes which occurred as the First World War continued for over four deadly years. "Throughout the war years," Vance writes, "rural life remained the dominant Canadian experience. And an intimate look at one township can tell us much about a war that has largely been interpreted through an urban lens" (p. 6). Utilising the monograph in this way, East Flamborough is used as a case study into a much larger national experience. For those who have read such works as Jim Blanchard's *Winnipeg's Great War*, or James M. Pitsula's *For All We Have and Are: Regina and the Experience of The Great War*, a less familiar local approach to a broader historical event may shed further light on the nation's challenges during the conflict.

<sup>1</sup> Tim Cook, *The Secret History Of Soldiers: How Canadians Survived the Great War* (London: Allen Lane, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Robert Rutherford, *Hometown Horizons: Local Responses to Canada's Great War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004).

*A Township at War* begins the discussion with a simple question: what did rural and urban mean during this period of history? Vance writes that the term “urban,” according to the census definition, described “any incorporated city, town, or village, regardless of population” (p. 6). This means that what we would consider a “small town” of perhaps sixty inhabitants could be listed as “urban” if that locale is incorporated. Using this as a backdrop for the rural aspect of the national war experience, the author dives into his own place of childhood memories, East Flamborough.

The book flows chronologically from the years before the war through the early 1920s. As the reader moves forward, changes to the landscape, industry and the people themselves begin to take shape. Central to the book is Waterdown, a small, incorporated village, which is now amalgamated into Hamilton, Ontario. Vance takes us on a tour of the town in the beginning of the book. He highlights numerous structures, streets and points of interest to the locals. This permits the reader to draw a clear picture in their head of the quaint town within East Flamborough. Businesses, families and landmarks are described in detail and give the reader a better understanding of rural life in Ontario.

Chapter Two, titled “1914,” transitions from peacetime to show how locals prepared to send men off to war. During the summer months of 1914, Vance takes us to local meetings, sporting events and visits with neighbours in the community. However, events in Europe were also in the minds of many in the region as Britain placed itself on the path to war, and therefore drawing Canada into the conflict. The township was not immune from any of these events. Patriotic meetings, financial drives and enlistment are covered in depth by the author.

Vance’s writing style combines academic research with intimate human-interest stories that formed part of this major historical event. In Chapter Three, “1915,” East Flamborough braces for a long struggle, conducting benefit events, volunteer work and other means to support local men who were whisked away to Europe. As the author states, “East Flamborough was getting a crash course in the reality that, beneath the patriotic fervour, local issues were always at work—who would pay, who would profit, equality of opportunity, equity in treatment” (p. 99). Also noted within this chapter is just how the men dealt with their new lives in the military. We understand, through their letters home, just how miserable and boring their existence was

during training and transport to the front. Readers travel to Ypres with these early volunteers, the men of the 1st Division, as their first real test under fire occurs around Kitcheners' Wood. Vance highlights the chaos around the early actions in the war, including the use of chlorine gas and its effects on those caught in its path.

In Chapter Four, "1916," as the war dragged on, recruitment in Waterdown and East Flamborough remained steady. Men who were not able to serve in early months or years now joined. Vance points out that propaganda, either through the use of posters or the showcasing of veterans from previous wars as models of manhood, the Canadian Expeditionary Force intended to keep recruiting as hard as ever. Readers are also exposed to the subject of desertion. Sometimes overlooked due to blemishes on family histories, desertions were quite common as the war continued.

Following a chronological order, Chapter Five discusses conscription and the Military Service Act of 1917. Readers are introduced to the political upheaval that followed. For readers in other nations where drafts were enacted, such as the United States, the parallel course of the politics and social behaviour towards the issue are eerily similar. What was most interesting was that in East Flamborough, men who sought to be exempt from the Military Service Act were not seen in a negative light. Perhaps because the locale was so small, many of their peers understood that they could not serve for one reason or another. Sons of local farmers received deferments and men whose jobs were deemed "vital" to the local economy as well as their family's livelihood were also deferred regularly.

In Chapter Six, "1918," Vance points out that the nation had changed since the war began: "Daylight savings time, income tax, censorship, national registration, conscription, a new Unionist government that uneasily straddled party lines, votes for women, and a whole host of other innovations, large and small, were changing the way Canadians lived their lives" (p. 181). The asset of the book is that the author takes larger, national trends and issues and puts them on a local level. Just as in larger cities, smaller sections of the country were impacted by the changes listed above. When we look at East Flamborough during the Great War, the phrase, "all politics are local," comes into form.

Throughout Chapter Six, and later Chapter Seven, "After," readers see the true scope of how the war changed the men involved, the families who waited at home and the township itself. We see

men who can never forget the things they saw in Europe, a changed landscape on the home front and a nation changed politically and socially for years to come. Jonathan Vance provides a great monograph, which showcases the reach of a conflict thousands of miles away, the social change that can come from it and some of the local events and customs that stayed the same. It is a story that could take place in many townships across any of the provinces throughout the nation. And for that reason, this book is a way to connect with the First World War generation on a more intimate level. Through this work, readers can ponder how conflict changed the lives of their own ancestors and their townships.

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