

## Review of "War Junk: Munitions Disposal and Postwar Reconstruction in Canada" by Alex Souchen

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Alex Souchen. *War Junk: Munitions Disposal and Postwar Reconstruction in Canada*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2020. Pp. 282.

The last few decades have witnessed far-reaching developments in the scholarship on twentieth century Canadian military history, not least the Second World War period. Researchers have explored political and military leadership, strategy, the many facets of national mobilisation, as well as battlefield tactics, operations and technological developments. In *War Junk: Disposal and Postwar Reconstruction in Canada*, Alex Souchen turns to aspects of the war that have received rather less scrutiny: the social, economic and material complexities of demobilisation and the return to peacetime norms. This innovative study of the War Assets Corporation, war surplus disposal policies and operations and the repurposing of war surplus material, is long overdue.

Souchen successfully pursues three objectives. The first is to explore the legacies of militarisation in the context of late-war and immediate post-war demobilisation. The second is to bridge military history and material culture/discard studies. The third is to contextualise military surplus as a form of waste that could be categorised as both trash and treasure. He deliberately avoids any consideration of the role that surpluses may have played in historical preservation or the construction of memory. "Recounting the history of how surplus militaria were used up, transformed, or otherwise destroyed," according to Souchen, "means eschewing the traditional connections between material culture, preservation and memory." Consequently, readers who are "interested in the material culture of memory and its tethering to military surpluses must look elsewhere"; Souchen's work concerns the "munitions or supplies that never made it into personal collections, memorials or museums" (pp. 12-13).

Souchen argues convincingly that disposal policies resulted in fairly clear "winners" and "losers" in postwar Canada. The winners tended to be larger companies and distributors, who for all practical purposes enjoyed privileged access to surpluses at the top of the supply chain in a massive reverse logistics project. The losers were ordinary Canadians – including veterans – whose tax dollars had paid for the goods in the first place, but who were forced to purchase repackaged surplus from retailers at inflated prices, instead of directly from the government. At the same time, Souchen shows that many Canadians benefitted indirectly from disposal policy measures that prioritised

government departments at the federal, provincial or municipal levels. For example, hard pressed universities were outfitted with all manner of surplus buildings and furnishings to accommodate the tens of thousands of veterans who decided to pursue higher education immediately after the war.

The book is arranged thematically in six chapters. For the purposes of summary, these may be usefully paired off into thirds.

The first two chapters examine the disassembly of the war economy, and the development of policies for disposal operations. Here Souchen reveals the myriad challenges involved in balancing political, economic and social imperatives. The third and fourth chapters largely concern the physical realities of disposal, including the storage and transportation of assets and the costs and benefits involved in relocating potentially useful items to marketplaces where they might actually be needed. Overall, these first two-thirds of the book speak directly to the legacies of militarisation in the context of late-war and immediate post-war demobilisation (one of Souchen's three main objectives). This portion of the book also effectively constitutes a sophisticated case study of the complexities of Canadian bureaucratic practices in the mid-twentieth century. The bureaucratic/administrative dimension of surplus disposal is indeed essential to the book's larger narrative, although at some points the level of detail concerning the organisation and operating procedures of the War Assets Corporation and associated agencies may test the patience of general readers.

Chapters five and six follow a range of surplus items—clothing, medical supplies, motor vehicles, naval vessels, aircraft, machine tools, construction equipment and buildings—from disposal to re-use, with some instructive focus on end users, and the manner in which items were adapted or repurposed for postwar needs. This final third of the book is the most engaging from a material culture perspective, and is likely to have the greatest appeal to specialists and general readers alike. It also achieves Souchen's second objective: to build a bridge between military history and material culture/discard studies.

Throughout *War Junk*, Souchen illustrates that military surplus was indeed a form of waste that could be categorised as trash and treasure almost in the same moment, clearly achieving his third objective.

Although the book offers a comprehensive analysis of disposal policies, methods and to a lesser degree, consequences, Souchen

misses a few opportunities to round out the narrative. For example, he refers in more than one instance to the impact of post-First World War disposal measures on Second World War policy-making. Yet *War Junk* neither explains exactly how the Canadian government disposed of surpluses after the First World War, nor offers any definitive comparative measurement of the scope and impact of disposal operations after 1918 versus after 1945. As it stands, *War Junk* is probably a lean enough book to justify further detail on post-1918 surplus disposal.

The fourth and fifth chapters offer a fascinating material-cultural survey of disposal and repurposing. There is, however, some room to delve more deeply into the retail side of the narrative, including the nature of the marketplace, and the manner in which ordinary Canadians, especially children and young people, found new uses for surplus equipment and clothing. For example, Souchen refers briefly to Novack's, a military surplus retailer that operated from 1939 until 2012 in London, Ontario. A former owner of Novack's still resides in London today, and could have shed useful light on the nuances of surplus retail sales and the customer base during the postwar period.

Finally, it is not fully clear why Souchen elected to situate the commemorative use of surplus items so definitively out of bounds in this otherwise rich study of disposal measures. After all, the conversion of an aircraft, tank or artillery piece into a local monument could reasonably be interpreted as a form of repurposing. And as it happened, at least some of the surpluses that were retailed for civilian consumption, such as army pattern water bottles, haversacks, canvas goods or uniforms, *did* ultimately reach personal collections, if perhaps many years after the war. These smaller goods were sometimes marked with the ink stamp of the War Assets Corporation prior to disposal. More than a few items in personal collections today still bear visible CWA stamps.

In sum, *War Junk* makes an entirely fresh contribution to a growing body of scholarship on Canada and war in the twentieth century. It is a multi-faceted work that will appeal to general readers of Canadian military history; historians of demobilisation, reconstruction and state formation; economic and business historians; and specialists in material culture and environmental history.

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