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Review of "Untold: Northeastern Ontario's Military Past. Volume One, 1662 - World War I" and "Untold: Northeastern Ontario's Military Past. Volume Two, World War II - Peacekeeping" by Dieter K. Buse and Graeme S. Mount

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Dieter K. Buse and Graeme S. Mount. *Untold: Northeastern Ontario's Military Past. Volume One, 1662—World War I*. Sudbury: Latitude 46 Publishing, 2018. Pp. 280.

Dieter K. Buse and Graeme S. Mount. *Untold: Northeastern Ontario's Military Past. Volume Two, World War II—Peacekeeping*. Sudbury: Latitude 46 Publishing, 2019. Pp. 200.

Speaking as a private citizen raised in North Bay, Ontario, in the heart of the geographical parameters of these volumes (and the same city where one of the authors was raised), it is a relief to at last see a study dedicated exclusively to the military history of the region and its people. Accordingly, the two-volume work is expected to adorn the bookshelves of many a Northern Ontario home where dwell an history enthusiast. It was written to be a popular work of history and as such is published through a smaller company based in Sudbury, thus the methodology is straightforward. Speaking as an historian though, it is disappointing to see that this long overdue geographical focus does not translate into perspective. A history of people and soldiers who have been marginalised in the traditional metropolitan narrative demands nothing more than an abandonment of the metropolitan historical method that coincides with its colonial and neo-colonial hegemonic dominance of the region. Dieter K. Buse and Graeme S. Mount, the authors of *Untold*, unfortunately, do not challenge in any way the historiographical, social, economic or political hegemonic power of the commercial metropolitan empire centered around Toronto and the St. Lawrence River systems. It makes no attempt to translate regional culture into how war was interpreted or experienced or how it may differ (or compare) to those of the metropolitan. For readers who know nothing about the geography or history of Canada, this history could have been copied and pasted into any geographical region and still look the same.

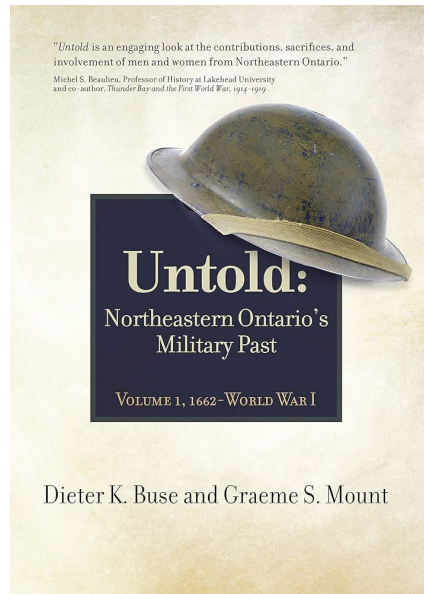
Perhaps this was on purpose. The experience of war is after all universal. Soldiers from even the most diverse backgrounds could, and did, share the experience of the mud, the cold, the rats, the diseases and the threat of death from a faceless enemy on the battlefields of the Western Front, the mountains of Italy or the beaches of Normandy. Regardless of who they are or where they came from, any soldier will recognise themselves in someone else's personal account of battle, which can be found in each volume. Yet, because of the

historical forces of regionalism and the realities of living on the margins of the British Empire, and as an unofficial colony of the Commercial Empire of the St. Lawrence, as well as the ethnic and gendered history of the region, total war and its regional impact translates differently on the society of Northeastern Ontario. To that end, there is no discussion of the impact of war on the region, no discussion of the pressures of total war, no discussion of ethnic tensions triggered by foreign war and no conscription; put simply, no *mentalité*.

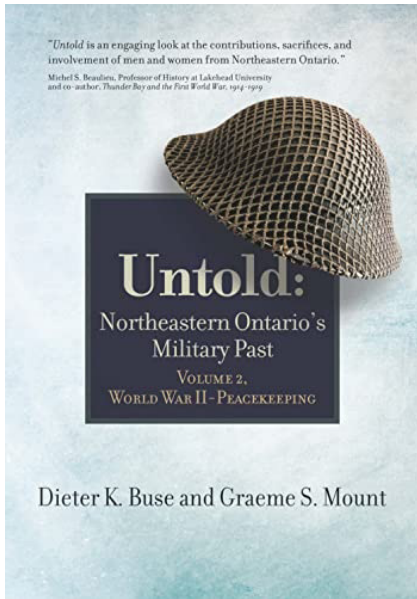
It is always easy for a reviewer to sit in the proverbial armchair lamenting what has not been done and suggest a different course of action. The task at hand is to review what has been done and understand the authors' decisions, framework, research and analysis. *Untold* does after all deliver on its promise to tell a military history of Northeastern Ontario. This alone represents an important shift in the writing of Canadian military history when contrasted against the strictly operational, often technological, at times Whiggish and very impersonal character of other works produced by historians of the authors' generation. Additionally, Ontario is and always has been presented as a monolith where the largest urban areas of Southern Ontario are exclusively used to tell the story of the entire region including the north.

The trend since the early 2000s has attempted to introduce forgotten geographical areas and their people into these grand narratives. By far the most read example is Robert Rutherford's *Hometown Horizons* (2004) which compared the experience of the First World War between three medium sized cities, Trois-Rivières, Guelph and Lethbridge. Using the framework of ritual and by also emphasising the commonality of these histories, the belief systems and the rhetoric that divided recruits, veterans and enemy aliens,¹

¹ See Robert Rutherford, *Hometown Horizons: Local Responses to Canada's Great War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004), 43-45.



Dieter K. Buse and Graeme S. Mount



Rutherforddale all but confirmed that geography simply did not matter in the same way as it would in *Untold* fifteen years later. This perspective is also found when comparing specific studies of hometown experience or insertion of one city or town into war narratives. In the historiography of Northern Ontario these include works like *Thunder Bay and the First World War* (2018) whose authors perhaps worded their position best in declaring their region to have been a “distillation of a nation at war.”²

This distillation has resulted, in Canadian military historiography, in a stagnant assembly line of texts that would only appeal to local interest as the broader interpretations, patterns

and history are as monolithic in perspective as any combined national survey. As a result, the authors of *Untold* have found no need to include the hometown experience in their study. The focus is instead on individual soldiers and not the society that produced them, so any comprehensive understanding of regionally shaped experience is impossible. The availability of source evidence accounts for this focus. The digitisation of First World War personnel records at Library Archives Canada (LAC) and elsewhere have made available digital scans of soldiers' attestation papers and medical examination filled out upon enlistment. Additionally, the Canadian Letters & Images Project undertaken by the Canadian War Museum and Vancouver Island University have digitised many letters, photographs, diaries and memoirs of these soldiers. The authors of *Untold* have made great use of these records to reconstruct the everyday experiences of their Northern Ontarians.

The organisational structure of the volumes is most interesting. Each volume is divided into three key sections: A contextualising history of events, “The Wars,” which satisfies any readers interested

² Michel S. Beaulieu, David K. Ratz, Thorold J. Tronrud and Jenna L. Kirker, *Thunder Bay and the First World War, 1914-1919* (Thunder Bay: The Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society Inc., 2018), 11.

in operational history; a thick description (of sorts) of individuals' "Experiences"; and a narrative epilogue of "Memories and Remembrances." *Volume One* opens thusly:

Did the women and children of Northeastern Ontario not experience shortages of food and coal on the home front? Did ethnic groups not repeatedly struggle with divided loyalties between their old and new homelands during the war? If this book provides answers to such questions, it will have served the purpose of showing Northeastern Ontario was more than a place to pass through. It also serves as a source of men, women, and wartime support during the conflicts that have shaped the country (vol. 1, p. 11).

Physical, not human geography is thus the only theoretical limit of the study and given the nature of the sources used in research, it also lends itself as a soldier's history; "because the region has been neglected" is the only reason why this area, why these towns, and why these soldiers are studied.

Why this periodisation is a clear attempt to narrate an entire history requiring two volumes. The year 1662, while appearing to be an arbitrary start date for *Volume One*, it is chosen for a specific reason. The era of private investment in New France was ending and, under King Louis XVI, it became a Royal Colony. The crown itself was now dedicated to conquest of the region and troops were sent to the St. Lawrence River valley to counter the near constant threat of the Haudenosaunee or "People of the Long House" with whom the French had been at near constant war since before the forging of alliances in 1615. The authors use the common name Iroquois, referring to the linguistic grouping, as an indiscriminate term for them (vol. 1, pp. 15-16). This is, however, where the study begins to fall short and where the ponderings about geography and perspective begin. In addition to imposing their anachronistic modern political geographical boundaries on the region in this early time period, the dedication of only fifteen pages in a two-volume study makes the inclusion of the parameter of 1662-1914 in the title of the first volume rather brash. Indeed, the history from 1662 to 1902 and the First World War could have been, or should have been, their own volumes.

Buse and Mount acknowledge the difficulties of writing this history. In spite of the efforts made recently to decolonise the writing of Canadian history, the western metropolitan tradition of centralizing

empirical evidence remains a staple. In 1997, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled in *Delgamuukw v British Columbia*:

Notwithstanding the challenges created by the use of oral histories as proof of historical facts, the laws of evidence must be adapted in order that this type of evidence can be accommodated and placed on an equal footing with the types of historical evidence that courts are familiar with, which largely consists of historical documents.³

Unfortunately, many historians remain skeptical about the credibility of indigenous oral tradition, and none is used to write this early history. In absence of any historical analysis in *Untold* beyond those aforementioned parameters, there seemed little incentive to do so for this section.

The authors do though accept the epistemological impasse of the empirical tradition in this short section. They acknowledge that the written accounts of the earliest time period, accounts of the wars that had occurred between the regions' First Nations, incited by contact and trade competition with the colonisers, served the agenda of the European writers of the accounts (vol.1, p. 16). Their example, and it is worthwhile mentioning, is the 1908 pamphlet *Warriors of the Ojibway Country*. Other Eurocentric sources including missionary accounts and memoirs, or secondhand accounts, as some of them died in these wars and were subsequently canonised, are not mentioned.

Oral tradition is also absent from the examination of the "Indian Draft" section of the chapter titled "Special Units and Identities." The study is narrowed to Moosonee thanks to the complete records accessed by the authors of the Anglican Diocese of Moosonee (vol. 1, p. 260, n. 156). The section also uses the standard procedure of the whole volume of providing a general history of individuals using their attestation and medical papers. Writing soldiers' history in this fashion presents the military historian with its own unique set of challenges. The authors themselves alert the readers of the difficulties of finding soldiers who enlisted into battalions from other regions. Additionally, the search engine algorithm employed by LAC favors individualism. It is impossible therefore to narrow search parameters by battalion when using only the main page which adds another layer of difficulty

³ *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia*, 1997 CanLII 302 (SCC), [1997] 3 SCR 1010 para 87, accessed 31 May 2023, <https://canlii.ca/t/1fqz8>.

for researching for a regional study. The search parameters have their own history as wartime censorship prohibited the publication of unit names and numbers, only individuals. At this stage of research, Buse and Mount have excelled despite the difficulties.

The “Experiences” section of part two containing this discussion lends itself to further analysis of the framing devices and methodologies used in the writing of both volumes. *Volume One* is divided into four chapters: (4) Individual Encounters, 1914-1919; (5) Special Units and Identities; (6) Life When Not Being Shot At; (7) Away From Home, Wounded and Dying. This section in *Volume Two* is far more comprehensive: (6) Why Paivio went to Spain; (7) Flying: A Northern Specialty; (8) Supposed Enemy Aliens and POW Camps; (9) The Diversity of War: Experiences On and Under Ground; (10) Going to Sea and Adopting Ships; (11) The Social Side of War: Tourism and Marriage; (12) War on the Home Front: A Region Transformed; (13) Military Families of the Northeast. Each subject lends itself to a very different mode of analysis and leaves readers curious about a number of topics in *Volume One*. Generally, the organisation is topical and explained through instances and individuals.

Thus, part two of both volumes begins with experiences of individual soldiers from somewhere in Northeastern Ontario. Both sections present themselves as curation of one specific account and each ask very different questions of their sources despite serving similar functions in both volumes. Readers are introduced to soldiers from all corners of the area under study. All of these stories are taken from soldier’s diaries and memoirs. Diaries and memoirs serve very different purposes in an historical investigation as they are oftentimes written with very different intents. Diaries are written in real time for a variety of reasons including confessionals and are generally not intended for a wider readership. In the case of professional and semiprofessional writers, diaries are intended to later provide a draft or timeline for the writing of a memoir. Memoirs by contrast are usually written long after the events, are written for austerity, and are absolutely intended for a wider audience. Both diaries and memoirs are used only to provide the foundation of chronological narrative.

How the authors have used memoirs to describe the experience of POWs demonstrate, in comparable instances, two very different epistemologies of the use of memoir. In *Volume One*, the story of Edwin Durham of Sault Ste. Marie as a POW is narrated using his memoir. In volume two it is Jules Paivio of Sudbury whose memoir is

used for a very different purpose because of the nature of its creation. Durham's memoir is used authoritatively to describe daily life in a German camp. Likewise, so too is Percy Dunbar's recollections of prison life to the newspaper *Porcupine Advocate*. No sources are cited for these accounts leaving the reader pondering a rather important issue; the reputation for cruelty in the German prison camps. Durham's experience, as the authors point out, conflicts with the historical narrative of mistreatment, which he never mentions. By contrast, the entire section that lacks citations, but appears to contain credible witnesses including Dunbar, speak of cruelty and their long-term effects. Yet these accounts are not explored any further than mention. Here highlights the key difference in the sources used which are unfortunately overlooked in the attempt at pure narration. The memoir was written later with time for reflection and is assumed to be related to the fact that Durham would spend his latter years warning against the horrors of war (vol. 1, p. 101). By contrast, the *Porcupine Advocate* article appeared in May 1918 and would likely have been published as tool to maintain the hometown fervor for continuing the war effort.

In *Volume Two*, readers learn about the Spanish Civil War, a most politically divisive conflict, through the memoir of Paivio who fought for the Republican side. Here the authors relay the memoir's intended purpose with a long extract which represents a far more effective use of memoir as historical evidence. Paivio intended to write a personal manifesto for everyone explaining why he chose to fight for the Republicans, which is the question of the chapter (vol. 2, p. 207). Unfortunately, the divisive discourse of the time is mentioned only in passing and how those debates played out in Northeastern Ontario is absent but perhaps this too could be its own comprehensive study.

Returning to the matter of historical method, the limitations of the source parameters set forth in *Volume One* do enable a more comprehensive examination of the Second World War and the inclusion of sections dedicated exclusively to the home front. In *Volume One*, women's experiences at home, for example, is dubiously dotted across "Away from Home" and added as an afterthought to "Life While Not Being Shot At." Chapter 12 in *Volume Two* includes its own section on the impact of the war on women's work in Sudbury, Sault Ste. Marie and Timmins, and then uses the story of Sue Fioramanti as its case study (vol. 2, pp. 319-20). Again, this is the result of the source material used. Her story is told using an unsourced love letter

from a co-worker, an ID card and the *Sudbury Star* as the primary material. From these materials little more can be said about the impact of the war on the gendered division of labour in Sudbury in any more regionalist perspective than the more general national survey by Barbara Dickson.⁴ It is also lamentable that the Sudbury Historical Society's Oral History Project is not put to use here as the chapter is then forced to move on to a brief overview of Victory Bond sales, Inco, Falconbridge and the expansion of the North Bay airport in the space of ten pages (vol. 2, pp. 328-36).

Volume Two devotes the same limited focus to peacekeeping as the early time period received in *Volume One*. That is not to say that what is covered is of little interest. The story of the Thompson military family which transcended generations of Canadian military history from the First World War to Cypress is fascinating and is retold by the authors with care. Here, Michael "Mike" Thompson provides oral testimony of his family history as well as his time in Cypress, East Germany and El Tasa. This section appears rushed but requires further analysis given the nature of historical evidence used. As mentioned earlier, historians need to make good use of oral testimony, which has been done here, but in evidentiary procedure, the use of oral testimony to provide two different stories requires nuance in writing and presentation. Put simply, first-hand and second-hand memory cannot be presented in the same way. Historians need also be aware of the influence of the *mentalité* of the present when recording and relaying memories of both sorts. Mike is providing first an oral testimony that has been passed down to him; the story of his grandfather who served in the First World War and his father and uncle who served in the Second. Mike's own story is then presented which includes bearing witness to the aftermath of the brutality of Turkish Cypriots (vol. 2, p. 345). The authors chose, because of the parameters of the study, to conduct a "single story" oral interview which did not appear to include any material on Mike's life growing up in Northeastern Ontario which once again shows that those parameters do not translate into perspective.

⁴ Barbara Dickson, *Bomb Girls: Trading Aprons for Ammo* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2016).

Since Ramsey Cook first advocated in the 1980s⁵ the importance of regionalism and identity in the writing of Canadian history, regionalist sentiment has only increased. Canada today is home to many regionalist, separatist sentimentalists stemming from a collective sense of feeling marginalised from the metropolitan hegemony of the Commercial Empire of the St. Lawrence. To their detriment, these movements have been exploited if not hijacked by the Canadian Far Right. Nevertheless, these regionalist sentiments have produced a vast quantity of regional studies which are overtaking broad national metropolitan narratives in the writing of Canadian history. *Untold*, the military history of one Canada's geographically marginalised regions is one such story that needed to be told and would serve the casual history reader quite well. Local history is well balanced with wider regional history and contextualised within a national narrative. It is only in the historical method of the strict reliance on metropolitan empirical tradition where the study falls short. The reasoning for this methodology, in an attempt to introduce an overlooked population to a more broad historiography, is obvious; "it is the ambition of all nations which enjoy a literary culture to possess a harmonious and vivid narrative of their own past history,"⁶ said Leopold von Ranke, the recognised forefather of this empirical tradition of writing history, and with the publication of *Untold*, the military history of Northern Ontario has been written.

Even von Ranke's sentiment extended beyond that need for inclusion: "for only by this can the nation attain to a perfect self-consciousness, and feeling the pulsation of its life throughout the story, become fully acquainted with its own origin and growth and character."⁷ Historiography has come a long way since the mid-nineteenth century with all of the efforts made in the name of "pulsation of character" distinct from the dominant hegemonic power structure, whether it be the introduction of *mentalité* to the historical profession, the use of new kinds of evidence or an acknowledgement

⁵ "Perhaps instead of constantly deploring our lack of identity, we should attempt to understand and explain the regional, ethnic and class identities that we do have. It might just be that it is in these limited identities that 'Canadianism' is found" Ramsay Cook, "Canadian Centennial Celebrations," *International Journal* 22 (1967): 659-63.

⁶ Leopold von Ranke, *A History of England: Principally in the Seventeenth Century*, vol 1 (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1875), v.

⁷ von Ranke, *A History of England*, v.

of said hegemonic power structure in the writing history; in other words the translation of topology into perspective. Yet, the authors by setting the parameters of research to this tradition have effectively handcuffed themselves to a strictly metropolitan bias in presentation as the sources used were obviously instruments of the dominant geographical region and classes. Even if the number of soldiers and testimonies were increased, if more women and indigenous peoples were included, if more of the smaller communities were included and if the conflicts beyond the two World Wars were more comprehensively explored, the study would still be handcuffed. Buse and Mount contend of their soldiers, “their different frames of reference are revealed in the way they describe wartime experiences and the way they later commemorated the wars” (vol. 1, p. 11). The problem is that this sentiment is never practically applied in source use or criticism; therefore, the reader rarely does more than “pass through” Northeastern Ontario. In that sense, Northeastern Ontario’s military past remains, for now, untold.

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