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Authors' Response to Review of "Untold: Northeastern Ontario's Military Past. Volume One and Two"

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NOTES AND COMMENTS

Letter to the Editor

Authors' Response to Review of *Untold: Northeastern Ontario's Military Past. Volume One and Two*.

In the academic world, it is normal to accept that reviewers may have a different historical perspective from authors of a book. However, when a perspective is marred by errors of fact and by ideological outlook, perhaps the authors should be permitted to object.

Though we are grateful that the editors of an academic journal would allow nine pages to be devoted to a review of our two volumes, *Untold: Northeastern Ontario's Military Past*, we question the odd comments offered. The reviewer, Curtis B. Robinson, devotes as much space to what we should or could have done differently from what is in those volumes. His review includes lengthy asides on Ranke's views of historical reality, on undefined "*mentalité*," on some vague "perspective" approach, on the validity of oral history (including quotations from court cases), on regional "sentimentalism" (irrelevant to our outlook) and on some so-called national "hegemonic narrative," at the expense of a fair and full presentation of the book's contents. He insists that "A history of people and soldiers who have been marginalised in the traditional metropolitan narrative, demands nothing more [*sic*: less?] than an abandonment of the metropolitan historical method that coincides with its colonial and neo-colonial hegemonic dominance of the region" (p. 42). If such a hegemonic history existed it has been more than undercut since social, labour, women, gender and queer history have attained status in the field, but to illustrate that would take this commentary too far afield.

Robinson acknowledges that no account of the military contributions, experiences and ways of remembering or memorialising wars by people from Northeastern Ontario existed previous to ours. However, the main answer which we provided as to why the participation of Northeasterners is overlooked by nationally focused accounts, namely because most of the battalions from the region

were absorbed into units identified with other places, usually large southern urban centres, is a finding which escaped the reviewer. At one point he states: “*Untold* does after all deliver on its promise to tell a military history of Northeastern Ontario” (p. 43). This is odd in that he concludes that “Northeastern Ontario’s military past remains, for now, untold,” (p. 51), because we did not do it his way.

Doing history Robinson’s way might be fraught with problems. Among the reviewer’s factual errors: he claims that in 1662 the King of France was Louis XVI (p. 45); he twice refers to the Porcupine *Advance* as the Porcupine *Advocate* (p. 48); twice he misspells Cyprus as Cypress; and at the same place mistakenly states that Canadian soldiers served in “East Germany” during the Cold War (p. 49). Regarding the section on special units, in particular “The Indian Draft; or Indigenous Experiences,” he completely misreads the account by claiming the “study is narrowed to Moosenee” (p. 46) when in fact we cite cases and provide experiences of Indigenous soldiers (vol. 1, p. 125-32) from Moose Factory, Fort Albany, Martens Falls, Attawapiskat, Manitoulin Island, and mention Sturgeon Falls and Chapleau.

He further claims that some information and cases are not sourced. Regarding the main one mentioned (Edwin Durham as POW) footnotes 52 and 131 in Volume One identify the Durham papers as being located in the Sault Ste. Marie public library. Contrary to his claim, newspaper sources are given by date of publication. Regarding Sue Fioramanti as defense production worker, he claims: “Her story is told using an unsourced love letter from a co-worker, an ID card and the *Sudbury Star* as the primary material.” (p. 48-49). This is very odd, since footnote 524 in Volume Two identifies a Sault Ste. Marie newspaper for the Fioramanti example (with credit to her daughter who provided the reproduced identity card, vol. 2, p. 320).

The reviewer praises us for research ability, but readers of his review would have difficulty knowing what finds we made in local archives (rarely accessed by authors from outside the region) and in personal collections obtained through publicity locally. Just a few examples from the volumes: the revealing diaries of the Manitoulin airman who experienced a death march at the end of the Second World War; the Sault woman who received over 400 love letters and telegrams from her signal corps fiancé working in England, France and Germany (who assessed his visit to Dachau in a remarkable way); the military hockey team made up of Northeastern recruits

but attributed to Toronto; the friend of King George V, Sydney Penhorwood, whose papers help understand the forestry corps and soldiers' leisure activities; the long term regional identification by the New Ontario [earlier designation for the north] Soldiers' Reunion in 1923; and the surprising number of Northeasterners who participated in the Dieppe raid and in the Italian campaign and were killed or captured at those locations.

The understanding of regionalism is crucial. We simply ask in what other publication were the miners who hollowed out the rock of Gibraltar (which Eisenhower thought crucial to the war) given their due or noted where they came from (all but one from Northeastern Ontario)? We showed in that case, among others, that significant contributions to the war effort were made by individuals and groups from a certain region that had provided them with specific skills. Well into the twentieth century, the Northeast has been, per the stereotype, a region of foresters, miners and railway builders. Hence, as we show, many men were recruited specifically for the Forestry Corps, the railway divisions and the mining operations, including for what became the basis for the Americanised version of war in *The Great Escape* with little credit to the skills of miners such as Wally Floody from Kirkland Lake. Hence, we think Robinson's understanding of regionalism is limited and his claim "this history could have been copied and pasted into any geographical region and still look the same," is inaccurate (p. 42). We suspect that Robinson can show no recruiting posters from the south prairies or the maritime ports asking for miners or foresters as we show from Timmins and North Bay. Certainly, much of the experience in training and on the fighting front was universal, but cutting forests in Scotland or mining under German trenches and in Gibraltar were among the different experiences based in regional attributes.

Among the odd claims in the review is "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" (p. 43). Unlike the reviewer's claim, we note the social impact of conscription and recruitment issues in recounting both wars. To illustrate: in Volume One we point to the tensions leading to the changing of French street names as well as to the information in a rarely used source, namely the tribunal appeals to avoid serving (vol. 1, p. 71ff). In Volume Two, we note the special methods employed to recruit to avoid needing to resort to conscription. However, dwelling

on that would have meant following the disparaged national narrative. Regarding the impact of the war, he might reread the manner in which men from the Northeast sought to find each other at the front to maintain home and family ties (vol. 1, p. 185-93), or what the huge loss of male lives meant in small communities. Regarding ethnic tensions, Robinson must have missed the section “Internment [of Austro-Hungarians] in Sault Ste. Marie and Kapuskasing” in Volume One, or “Supposed Enemy Aliens and POW Camps” in Volume Two. Those and other sections on women’s work and the transformation of cities, demonstrate the regional impact of the wars, so he is simply wrong to state that we found “no need to include the hometown experience in their study” (p. 44).

Robinson asserts that the military personnel files and the Canadian Letters and Images Project (which he acknowledges we utilised well), lead to “individualism” due to the source materials. He does not realize that through Ancestry.com the personnel files can be accessed and collated to bring together all those from a particular place or recruiting base. Further, many Northeast Canadian Legion branches have published numerous volumes identifying the personnel from their locale. Faulting us for insufficient use of oral history, the one oral collection he suggests regarding Sudbury, comprises mostly vague personal recollections collected by students with little historical training and ironically are cast in the mode of the national narrative he disparages.

We were not “handcuffed,” as Robinson repeats, by some “hegemonic” narrative with all its “colonial” and “neo-colonial” implications (or other trendy terms), but by historical facts and by trying to research, collect and present what had not been done before. Exemplar of the novelty were sections in each volume illustrating the types of Remembrance practiced in the region, which Robinson hardly acknowledged, perhaps because they fit no “hegemonic” schema.

Instead of Robinson’s offerings of “wie es eigentlich NICHT gewesen ist,” readers of his review may want to know why our books won the Ontario Historical Society’s Fred Landon Award for best regional study published in last three years in 2020. That story too is left untold.

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