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Review of "Afterlives of War: A Descendants' History" by Michael Roper

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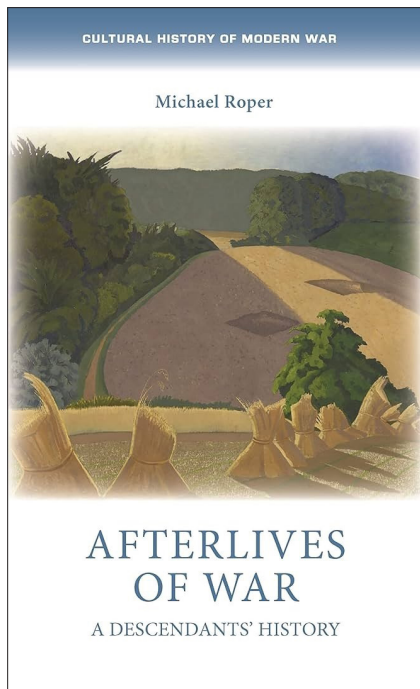
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Michael Roper. *Afterlives of War: A Descendants' History*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023. Pp. 368.

John Babcock died in 2010 at the age of 109. He was Canada's last Great War soldier and one of the last of the tens of millions of soldiers from the war that ended on 11 November 1918. The eyewitnesses and actors of that terrible struggle were now finally gone and the rest of us were untethered from history. And yet the war has not faded to oblivion: it continues to reverberate and refract through societies, amplified by the centennial commemorations that were heralded in many countries from 2014 to 2018. In those years of remembrance, there were new histories and exhibitions, artistic representations and pedagogical programs, films and plays along with ceremonies of renewing faith and promises of never to forget.

The descendants of soldiers were a key group involved in these acts of bearing witness and they are the subject of Michael Roper's *Afterlives of War*. A professor of sociology at the University of Essex and author of an outstanding previous history on the emotional survival of soldiers,¹ this new offering focuses on the British, Australian and German descendants of soldiers of the Great War who, in the author's words, "lived in its shadow" (p. 2). In this innovative work, Roper has used oral histories with descendants to better understand the war's legacy as it affected families. Having interviewed some ninety descendants, he has drawn out key stories and messages, while also attempting to analyse their shifting meaning. In Britain and Australia, the war was often a constant in the lives of children and grandchildren, who at times in their lives tried to better understand what a father or grandfather did far from home, be it in the trenches or behind the front lines. While often the veterans could not talk about their war stories or only revealed episodic glimpses of the past, this silence was sometimes slowly pierced. "Like a lot of veterans," recounted Elizabeth Games of her father who served as a British Tommy, "he never spoke of his experiences" (p. 66). She, like so many, yearned to know and better understand. Some descendants found that historic photographs were an entry into the war years, allowing conversations with those who served and providing clues for research after they had passed away. In other families, artifacts

¹ Michael Roper, *The Secret Battle: Emotional Survival in the Great War* (Manchester University Press, 2010).



and souvenirs were a physical presence, taking on new stories, generation after generation. German descendants usually had different ways of thinking about the war's impact on their families, not surprisingly considering that country's martial history from 1914 to 1945. From oral histories it is clear that they invested far less value in the sanctity of service, with few symbols across Germany like the poppy or Remembrance Day.

While the book in places drags with too many attempts to employ different layers of analysis – through extended explorations of the difference between the relationships of daughters and sons to fathers, for example – there is much value here. The power of family history and military genealogy is evident in Canada, with descendants

seeking to better understand how their families have been shaped by war. Historicising that process is important, as is Roper's keen insights into oral histories. The author, too, writes himself into the book, presenting his attempts over the decades to understand his grandfather's service in the Australian Imperial Force. As a young man, he was like many of the interviewed descendants: holding flawed views of the war, such as believing that all soldiers were victims. Roper explores some of these inconsistencies and how historians might make sense of those ideas that are little changed with emerging scholarship. The influence of Pat Barker's *Regeneration* series or Peter Jackson's *They Shall Not Grow Old* is also unpacked through oral histories, revealing how public and cultural memory can shape family and personal memory.

Canada's forty million citizens consist of millions of descendants who are linked to the Great War since some 560,000 veterans returned to their communities at war's end. How to understand that collective history is framed in multiple ways in this fine book that should provoke new studies. "Around half of the British recruits in the First World War were volunteers," writes Roper, "but every descendant is

in a sense a conscript" (p. 61). Those British, Australian, German or Canadian descendants did not choose their history, but they are in control of understanding it in more complexity, especially the place of their family member in what that now-gone generation called the war for civilization.

TIM COOK, *CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM*