

# MULTIMEDIA REVIEWS

## BOOK REVIEWS

**L. James Dempsey, *WARRIORS OF THE KING: Prairie Indians in World War I* (Canadian Plains Studies 37, Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1999).**

Dempsey first undertook this study as a master's thesis at the University of Calgary in the mid-1980s, claiming (as he does in the current monograph) that little has been published concerning the experiences of Western Canadian Indians in the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> While this statement is less true today than it was a decade ago, *Warriors of the King* is among the first published studies of the Aboriginal experience in the First World War. With Aboriginal veterans' public efforts for recognition and compensation throughout the 1990s, it is a timely subject worthy of serious academic research.

The author's purpose is to examine the contribution of four hundred Western Canadian Indians to the Canadian war effort from 1914-1918, and the concomitant effects on Aboriginal communities during the war and after the veterans returned home. Dempsey adopts an effective layout to examine the various ways in which Prairie Indians contributed to the war effort. He begins with an overview of the Aboriginal cultural background on the Prairies, with an emphasis on the maintenance of a pervasive 'warrior ethic' up to 1914.<sup>2</sup> Dempsey argues that this ethic, a continuing sense of loyalty to the British Crown (not the Canadian Government), and the dullness of reserve life encouraged Prairie Indians to enlist in large numbers - at least equal to the per capita ratio of non-Indian enlistment in the country. Despite the Indian Department and the military's initial reluctance to allow Indian enlistment, by 1917 Indian agents actively promoted and persuaded native participation in the Canadian Expeditionary Force. Conscription, which would have a dramatic effect on national unity across the country, was a concern in Prairie Indian communities although the draft was not extended to them. Dempsey then turns to the experiences of Indian soldiers overseas. In an anecdotal manner, he demonstrates how Prairie natives were seen to be elite snipers and dependable soldiers in the field. Finally, the author discusses the disappointment felt by Prairie Indian veterans when they returned home after the war. Their exposure to the broader world had changed them profoundly, Dempsey asserts, but they returned to the same patronizing, oppressive society that they had left behind. Although eligible for the vote overseas, they lost their democratic rights after the war. Furthermore, the inequitable eligibility requirements and dispensation of veterans' settlement packages (money and land), disadvantaged many Indian veterans. Although they had fought overseas, their legal status had not changed; they continued to be wards of the Crown. The veterans, armed with increased political awareness following their experiences at war, began to organize politically, culminating in the establishment of the League of Indians of Canada in the early 1920s.

Dempsey's strength lies in his description of the experiences of individual Prairie Indians, their families, and communities. The author identifies an apparent 'generation

gap' between elders and younger Indians over military service, a phenomenon supported by Indian Affairs records in Ottawa. His discussion of Native deserters is particularly enlightening, as he argues that they did not desert out of cowardice but out of loneliness, misunderstanding, and perceived familial obligations. Dempsey also explains how overseas action aggravated the prevalent problems of disease, especially tuberculosis, amongst Indians. The prose is clear and not convoluted. His photographs, most of them taken from the marvellous Glenbow collection, are not the usual stock pictures reproduced in Veterans' Affairs and National Defence publications. His list of Prairie Indian Enlistees, included as Appendix A, is also useful.

Drawing upon archival documents and newspaper articles, Dempsey elucidates or at least introduces various other important aspects of the war on Prairie Indian communities. He lists home front contributions to the war effort such as donations to the Red Cross, Canadian Patriotic Fund, and other war funds. In terms of Indian administration, he provides insights into the roles of Indian agents in recruitment. The thesis also demonstrates the practical application of Duncan Campbell Scott's worldview, supporting Brian Titley's assessment in *A Narrow Vision*. The Deputy Superintendent General's strong beliefs in "civilizing" the Indians influenced the nature of government response to Indians and the war effort. Other interesting sections include Dempsey's treatment of W.H. Graham's "Greater Production Effort," and its impact on Native communities, and the allocation of reserve land to returning non-Indian soldiers under the Soldier Settlement Act. However, like much of the book, these portions suffer from a poor grounding in available secondary literature.

Unfortunately, Dempsey did not really update his study using research that has appeared in the last decade, nor did he situate his discussion in broader historiographical debates. He makes a passing mention of Fred Gaffen's *Forgotten Soldiers* (1985) in his introduction (vii), but does not include the book in his bibliography. There is no mention of Janice Summerby's *Native Soldiers, Foreign Battlefields*, the NFB film *Forgotten Warriors*, nor the impressive scholarly literature that has appeared on the Aboriginal experience in the Second World War, including R.S. Sheffield and Hamar Foster's work on oral treaty promises and Aboriginal soldiers,<sup>3</sup> which would have been directly relevant to his discussion on conscription on pages 40-41. The most conspicuous absence is any mention of Sheffield and Foster's lengthy chapter of Volume 1 of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples Report dealing with Aboriginal veterans, which treads much of the same ground as Dempsey. A more rigorous examination can be found in Alistair Sweeney's report prepared for the Saskatchewan Indian Veterans Association (November 1979), but this too is not referenced. Jim Walker's article on the enlistment of visible minorities in the CEF<sup>4</sup> would have helped Dempsey situate his discussions of a proposed all-Indian regiment. In addition, Robin Brownlie and Sarah Carter's studies of Soldier Settlement on Indian lands would have placed the post-war experience in a scholarly context. He does not even bother to reference his own article on the subject.<sup>5</sup> In fact, his bibliography lists only five books published after 1987 (only one of which appears to have direct relevance), and no articles or contributions that have appeared since his thesis defence.

Specific aspects of the monograph were also superficial and problematic. Dempsey's numbers on Aboriginal enlistment beg further probing. His reliance on national enlistment figures undermine his implicit argument that Prairie Indians enlisted in greater numbers than the Canadian average. Although Dempsey correctly states that exact figures for Indian enlistment figures cannot be ascertained due to limitations in archival records, he stresses that "nearly 300" Prairie Indians served overseas. If only 267 known Indian members of combat units were from the Prairies (62), then Prairie Indians formed only 7.6% (@ 3500) or 6.7% (@4000) of the total number of Indians enlisted across Canada (his estimate is cited on page viii). However, Dempsey does not dispute Lieut. Maxwell Graham's estimate that in the three Western provinces there were probably 6,000 able-bodied adult Indian males who could serve (or roughly 27% of the total able-bodied adult Indian male population across Canada - see figures on 27-28). While this figure may be suspect, it does seem to indicate that Prairie Indians were enlisting at a far *smaller* rate proportionally than their Indian counterparts elsewhere in the country. If Prairie Indians enlisted at a small rate, then Dempsey should try to account for why they enlisted *at such a low proportional rate* rather than basing his entire thesis on the assumption that the Indian rate, (at 35% enlistment across Canada), was on par with or exceeded the rate of non-Indians. Furthermore, what were non-Aboriginal enlistment rates in the Prairie provinces? We are never told.

Dempsey's statistics also dispel the myth, offered by W.H. Graham, that "very few, if any" Prairie Indians who enlisted made it to the front.<sup>6</sup> Based on the author's research, more than a quarter of all enlistees were discharged before going overseas or serving in Canada. It would be useful to compare this rate to other regional groupings of Indians in Canada and to the general Canadian average.

Perhaps the most striking figure is the "extremely high casualty rate" raised on page 62 but not accounted for in his discussion. In Chapter Three, the author's examples suggest that Indian soldiers were 'very successful' soldiers and adapted well to the conditions on the front. Given the high casualty rate, the observer might state exactly the opposite, unless one can attribute their high losses to responsibilities above and beyond those of the average Canadian soldier. Sniping and scouting may suggest something along these lines, although Dempsey does not prescribe such a rationale. Obviously more work is needed to assess more accurately the 'success' of Indian soldiers on the battlefield beyond the anecdotal evidence cited by Dempsey. Was the contemporary image of the Indian soldier as superb sniper and brave warrior valid, or a romanticized myth perpetuated by self-serving bureaucrats in Ottawa? Relying on chief Indian Affairs bureaucrat Duncan Campbell Scott's statements on their war record at face value is hardly a definite assessment of their success (49-50), given his interest in demonstrating individual Indians' competencies and readiness to assimilate into Anglo-Canadian society through enfranchisement.

One of the most disappointing aspects of the research is the author's common use of Ontario examples in a study on Prairie Indians. This peculiarity is most acute in Chapter Two. For instance, he uses Chief F.M. Jacobs's letter to demonstrate "native sympathies" to the Crown (19), and discusses the organization of units in Ontario in late

1915 (23). Later, the author draws conclusions based on Duncan Campbell Scott's reflections on the Dokis and Nipissing Reserves (without citing any examples of similar behaviour affecting Western Canada - 67); the refusal of members of Manitoulin Island bands to fill in registration cards (72); and then uses the example of John Gadieux of the Port Arthur Agency in Ontario to illustrate how an Indian agent responded to an individual who refused to sign his card (73). Furthermore, Dempsey borrows a lengthy quote from Ojibwa James Redsky from the Lake of the Woods area (northwestern Ontario, not the Prairies) to describe the "typical" conditions that Prairie Indians experienced during the war. (59-60) Unfortunately, this reliance on Ontario cases in a book specifically focused on the experiences of Prairie Indians detracts from the study, and begs the question that, if the experiences were so common, why did the author decide to limit his research to the Prairies and not expand it to encompass Canada as a whole?

In general, Dempsey seems to deduce valid generalizations based on the available evidence. At times, however, his benchmarks for comparison are somewhat suspect. For example, the author argues that "based on their correspondence, it is notable that the Indian soldiers' impression of the war contrasted greatly with that reported in numerous books and articles written on World War One."(63-4) In comparing a dramatic passage about the horrors of the Western Front from Berton's *Vimy* with two letters from Indians in the trenches, Dempsey speculates that "conditions such as these were rarely mentioned by Indian soldiers, instead they viewed life in the trenches more positively."(64) Such a conclusion is not warranted based on the evidence provided for several reasons. Dempsey seems to imply that Berton's description of the trenches was indicative of non-Aboriginal Canadian letters home from the front. Anyone familiar with wartime correspondence knows that censors limited what could be written home; that soldiers at the front often avoided upsetting their already worried families with pessimistic news of hardship; and that Canadian soldiers' correspondence (not limited to that of the Indian soldiers) exposes a peculiar paradox between the "adventure" of the war and the boredom often experienced at the front lines.

While Dempsey does not discuss every aspect of the impact of the Great War with the same degree of depth, he does raise or answer most of the questions associated with the topic. One additional case study that might have proven useful to determining the impact of the war on Western Canada concerns the Sarcee reserve. Dempsey does not discuss the military's use of Sarcee (now Tsuu T'ina) land during the war years,<sup>7</sup> how development plans affected the First Nation's relations with the government and the local community, or whether this contributed to the absence of Sarcee (Tsuu T'ina) members being dispatched for overseas service. As Dempsey noted in Appendix A, three Sarcee band members enlisted in September 1918 in Calgary but were discharged at the request of the chief. (87) One begs to know whether this was related to the relationship between the First Nation and the military camp.

Jonathan Vance, in his award-winning *Death So Noble*, explained how the memory of the Great War was constructed in a myriad of ways during the interwar period. How did Prairie Indian veterans and their communities construct their memory of the war after the fighting stopped? Dempsey raises the issue of increased political awareness and

mobilization amongst Prairie Indians after the war, but provides no specific evidence apart from Mohawk Arthur Loft and, once again, the bureaucrats at Indian Affairs. One longs to hear the voices of the Prairie Indians themselves. Furthermore, Vance implies that the commonplace view of Indian soldiers as simply ‘forgotten warriors’ is a fallacy, at least in the case of World War I, and that “no factual account [of the Great War] was complete without a salutary reference to the gallantry of Canada’s ‘braves at war.’”<sup>8</sup> Does the same hold true for Western Canada?

It is not as though Dempsey did not have the space to expand his ideas. The monograph, excluding appendices, is a slender 84 pages. When it appeared as a thesis in 1987 it was a ground-breaking, state-of-the art study on a fresh topic. Although still a very interesting study, it could have used updating, expansion, and a more careful and comprehensive assessment of available evidence and secondary material. Its latest incarnation as a book at least makes Dempsey’s first foray into the important subject accessible to a wider audience, and allows future scholars to use the research as a springboard toward more rigorous academic study.

Greater awareness of Aboriginal contributions to Canadian war efforts in the twentieth century should bring with it broader cultural awareness. For example, a recent Canadian Forces initiative providing special pre-recruit training recognizes some of the particular obstacles experienced by Aboriginal peoples who wish to serve the country. Dempsey told the story of the Blood Indian named Bumble Bee who was discharged during World War One because he refused to let his braids be cut off. (50) It took more than seventy years, but recent legislation finally eliminates the possibility of such an occurrence. Bob Crane, a member of the Siksika Nation and former signals officer with the Canadian Forces, won the right for Aboriginal soldiers to wear their hair long. Some battles take a long time to wage, but they are worth it.

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<sup>1</sup> L. James Dempsey, “Indians of the Prairie Provinces in World War I,” M.A. Thesis, University of Calgary, 1987.

<sup>2</sup> I am intrigued by this idea, but did not find the evidence the author provided to be convincing. Future studies will hopefully buttress or challenge this explanation.

<sup>3</sup> R.S. Sheffield and H. Foster, “Fighting the King’s War,” *UBC Law Review* (1999): 53-74. See also R.S. Sheffield, “‘In the Same Manner as Other People...’: Government Policy and the Military Service of Canada’s First Nations People, 1939-1945,” M.A. Thesis, University of Victoria (1995), and M.D. Stevenson, “The Mobilisation of Native Canadians During the Second World War,” *Journal of the CHA* (1996): 205-226.

<sup>4</sup> James W. St.G. Walker, "Race and Recruitment in World War I: Enlistment of Visible Minorities in the Canadian Expeditionary Force," *Canadian Historical Review* LXX:I (March 1989): 1-26.

<sup>5</sup> "Problems of Western Canadian Indian War Veterans After World War One," *Native Studies Review* 5:2 (1989).

<sup>6</sup> *Treaty Days: Reflections of an Indian Commissioner*, (Calgary: Glenbow Museum, 1991), 100.

<sup>7</sup> See chapter two of P.W. Lackenbauer, "Politics of Contested Space: Military Property Development in Calgary," M.A. Thesis, University of Calgary, 1999.

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Vance, *Death So Noble* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997), 247.