

Canada's Digital Collections, "Newfoundland and The Great War."

http://collections.ic.gc.ca/great_war/home.html.

P. Whitney Lackenbauer

Newfoundland, as a British colony without control over its own foreign and defence policy in 1914, was at war when Britain was at war. Nevertheless, Newfoundlanders determined the nature and extent of their participation, and mobilized their population and resources to an unprecedented degree. More than 12,000 (out of an estimated population of 242,000), enlisted in the three Newfoundland forces: the Newfoundland Regiment; the Royal Naval Reserve; and the Newfoundland Forestry Corps; and the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF). Countless others were involved as workers and volunteers on the home front. "Newfoundland and the Great War" is a truly marvellous website, created by the Newfoundland and Labrador Heritage Web Project, based at Memorial University in St. John's, and funded by Industry Canada (responsible for Canada's Digital Collections). That war, the site's authors tell us, "marked a watershed in the country's history which is still remembered and commemorated." Thankfully, this website is an important step in ensuring that the latter continues as we enter the twenty-first century.

There are four broad sections to the site. The lion's share is devoted to a section providing articles on the many aspects of the war effort in Newfoundland and overseas. The reader is provided an overview of the political, military and economic "management

problems” that flowed from the war effort, but is primarily shown how the conflict united in a common cause a society often fragmented along religious (Catholic/Protestant), social (merchant/fisherman) and geographical (St. John’s/outport) lines. We are reminded that wars are fought on many fronts, and that thousands of Newfoundlanders served the war effort by raising and training the fighting forces, outfitting and supplying them, raising requisite funds, and caring for combatants’ families as well as returned soldiers and sailors. Women proved vital in every aspect, from knitting socks for soldiers to bolstering patriotism through organizations like the Women’s Patriotic Association. The project team has included copies of personal correspondence sent to members overseas, condolence letters from fraternal organizations to families, and even a copy of Margaret Duley’s 1916 booklet “A Pair of Grey Socks,” to ensure that their virtual tour retains a semblance of personal awareness and contact.

Thirty-six percent of Newfoundland’s population between the ages of 19 and 35 served with the Newfoundland Regiment, Forestry Corps, or Royal Naval Reserve. The site covers the early formation and training of the regiment, before tracing the “trail of the caribou” from Britain, to Egypt and Gallipoli, to the bloody horrors of the Somme (and Beaumont Hamel, where the regiment was nearly annihilated on 1 July 1916), and through costly engagements at Gueudecourt, Monchy-le-Preux, and Cambrai. These losses precipitated conscription, which was introduced in May 1918 after a divisive debate, but no conscripts were sent overseas. The all-volunteer force served with distinction during its last engagement at the Fourth Battle of Ypres before heading home. The authors make solid use of the soldier diaries and contemporary sources to furnish an

insightful and often compelling picture of Newfoundlanders overseas. By contrast, we are told next to nothing about the 3,296 Newfoundlanders who served with the CEF. The oft-forgotten story of the Royal Naval Reserve is, however, recounted briefly by mirroring the website developed by Stanley Hillier, and a brief overview of the forestry contingent provided. Perhaps most impressive, however, are the four letters sent home by Frances “Fannie” Cluett, one of 38 semi-trained nurses who served with the Volunteer Aid Detachment overseas, reproduced with the permission of the Centre for Newfoundland Studies. This colourful correspondence tells of working conditions for medical units overseas, and reinforces that the victims were not just faceless bodies to the nurses, but were painfully real people.

Remaining sections provide easy access to previously elusive visual and audio resources. The entire site contains a wealth of plate glass images held by the Provincial Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador (PANL) that have been digitized. The designers have wisely collected the images interspersed throughout the site (as well as many others), in a separate section, arranged under thematic headings, and have included a virtual scrapbook based on a ‘typical,’ privately-created photo album held by the PANL. Music from the Royal Newfoundland Regiment Band and Tickle Harbour’s version of the traditional song “The Valley of Kilbride” on Beaumont Hamel, as well as a three-minute excerpt from a 1981 interview with William Yetnam, one of the original “Blue Puttees,” are freely obtained. Finally, nineteen rare, vintage regiment video clips circa 1915 (taken from the film “For the Folks Back Home”) are available on the site. The site provides each clip in three formats: a low-quality version that could be streamlined over an

Internet connection, or two high-quality versions that could be downloaded and viewed. This versatility and appreciation of various user requirements attests to the careful, functional design of the site as a whole.

The site was intended to be an introduction to the experiences of Newfoundlanders in the Great War. Based on prodigious research, and written in coherent and readable prose, the end product brilliantly achieves and exceeds this objective. This website certainly deserves its place in the evolving history of the commemoration of Newfoundland's Great War, and provides the best available short synthesis of the subject to date.

P. Whitney Lackenbauer

University of Calgary