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"Unwanted Warriors: The Rejected Volunteers of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (Book Review)" by Nic Clarke

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Nic Clarke. *Unwanted Warriors: The Rejected Volunteers of the Canadian Expeditionary Force*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2015. Pp. 239.

In recent years, the experience of soldiers wounded, traumatised, or otherwise made sick by war has grown to become a central focus of research in the history of war and society. This is especially true of First World War studies where the history of shell shocked soldiers, veterans and their families, and war disabled has exploded in the English-speaking world. Nic Clarke's *Unwanted Warriors: The Rejected Volunteers of the Canadian Expeditionary Force* examines another group of often overlooked men: individuals who tried to join the military during the war but were rejected on medical or moral grounds. Clarke's argument is that because these men were denied the ability to serve, they were stigmatised and in some cases traumatised; accordingly, they should not only be regarded as another class of war disabled, but also thought of as casualties. While this may be pushing the argument a bit too far, as a whole the book does a good job of examining the mechanics of recruitment and medical inspection, the bureaucratisation of the enlistment process, and the experiences of these forgotten would-be soldiers.

The book is organised into seven chapters that explore both the development and institutionalisation of the concept of medical fitness and its employment by the army through much of the war as well as the experiences of the men who interacted with it. The first two chapters detail the mechanics of "grading," that is determining the observable characteristics that could be used to assign men to various categories of service, and how these rubrics changed as the need for men grew during the war. The third chapter looks at the ways in which the system failed to accomplish its goal of providing the army with fit men for service, underlining the inherent subjectivity of a process that was meant to be wholly objective. The fourth elaborates on why medical inspections failed to enroll many fit men while accepting others with characteristics that, at the time, would normally have made their bodies less desirable for the army. Here Clarke concludes that the concept of medical fitness was really a cipher for adherence to masculine and civic norms; doctors were more interested in enrolling the "right type" of men who adhered to a specific range of gender, class, and racial norms.

At this point, Clarke moves from looking at the development of what might be called “the military gaze” to the ways in which the lives of volunteers were shaped by the experience of rejection. Again, the author employs the concept of dominant masculinity to suggest that, because rejected volunteers were denied the right to perform their masculinity at a time when Canadian society expected men to do so, they were transformed into “unfit” men which cost them both social and cultural prestige. The second last chapter explores how the experiences of these men played out in their interactions with their communities, employers, their families, and potential sexual partners. The final chapter examines the ways in which some men tried to perform unfitness in order to avoid military service.

The idea that the concept of “fitness” might be a cipher for masculine norms rather than an objective measure of the physical abilities essential to military service has been thoroughly explored by historians.¹ What Clarke does is suggest that the experience of rejection could be life-altering and had real consequences for the so-called “unfit”—some of whom committed suicide. For this reason, Clarke argues that these men were also casualties of the Great War and lived a narrative of disability as a result. It is an interesting argument but, in this reviewer’s opinion, may require some modifications. First of all, unlike many so-called war disabilities, rejection was an invisible wound and so stigmatisation was probably a variable experience. As Clarke’s final chapter makes clear too, there is evidence that “unfitness” may have been commoditised and was even desirable in some cases.

To make his case, Clarke relies heavily on official military records and manuscript sources, especially the case files of 3,068 men rejected from service, most of whom were sent home from Valcartier Camp in the late summer of 1914 right after the outbreak of war. While discussions about the army’s approach to medical inspection and recruitment are based on official and private sources spanning the whole war, the files of the rejected volunteers from 1914 are used to look at the experience of rejection. While the information derived from

¹ Among others, see Mark Moss, *Manliness and Militarism: Educating Young Boys for War in Ontario* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2001); and Mark Osborne Humphries, “War’s Long Shadow: Masculinity, Medicine and the Gendered Politics of Trauma, 1914–1939,” *Canadian Historical Review* 91, no. 3 (September 2010): 503–531.

these files is fascinating and certainly illuminates the experiences of these ordinary Canadians, this reviewer is left wondering whether those experiences are truly representative. These men tried to enlist at the beginning of the war when there was a surplus of recruits rather than a deficit and when "volunteerism" was itself a performance of masculinity. One wonders how these experiences would compare to the many Canadians (the majority in fact) who sought an exemption from conscription or were conscripted and then rejected for medical reasons. In fairness to the author, however, the files of the Valcartier rejections have been preserved and are available to researchers whereas later files do not seem to have survived.

Clarke's *Forgotten Warriors* is an important book that explores a forgotten aspect of the First World War experience in Canada for the first time. Like all good books that make a first foray into the field, it also points towards new directions for future research. It is highly recommended for students of the Great War.

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