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Review of "Thunder in the Skies: A Canadian Gunner in the Great War" by Derek Grout

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Derek Grout. *Thunder in the Skies: A Canadian Gunner in the Great War*. Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2015. Pp. 472.

The study of First World War diaries, both personal and operational, has grown considerably over the last two decades in Canada. Dundurn Press in particular has contributed significantly to the amount of titles in this expanding genre of historical literature.¹ Derek Grout's *Thunder in the Skies: A Canadian Gunner in the Great War* is the latest of these publications to investigate what war diaries can reveal about soldiers' firsthand experiences. Grout is a popular historian whose past writings have examined ship culture and ship wrecks in the Atlantic Ocean. *Thunder in the Skies* was published in 2015 and follows the account of Lieutenant Albert (Bert) Sargent as well as a slew of others that enlisted into the Canadian Field Artillery in 1914. Drawing from their wartime experiences, Grout details the daily life of gunners behind the frontlines and contends that serving as a gunner could at times be deadlier and more hazardous than infantry serving in the trenches.

Thunder in the Skies is composed of thirty-seven short chapters, but for the purposes of this review these chapters can be divided into four parts. Grout begins with his first encounter with the diary, letters, and photographs, which he purchased from Sargent's son-in-law while exploring a church book sale. Chapters One to Six cover the outbreak of war in 1914 until Sargent's journey to Britain in March 1915. Born in Montréal, Sargent is described as having a conventional, middle-class upbringing. After graduating with a degree from McGill University in 1913, Sargent worked as a junior engineer for his brother-in-law's business. When war was declared, Bert was unable to enlist in the infantry due to an eye condition.

¹ Dundurn Press' past line-up includes Bruce Cane, *It Made You Think of Home: The Haunting Journal of Deward Barnes, Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1916-1919* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2004); Deborah Cowley, ed., *Georges Vanier, Soldier: The Wartime Letters and Diaries, 1915-1919* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2004); Peter Hardy Bick, *Dairy of an Artillery Officer: The First Canadian Divisional Artillery on the Western Front* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2011); and William Arthur Bishop, *The Courage of the Early Morning: A Biography of the Great Ace of World War I* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2011). See also Sandra Gwynn, *Tapestry of War: Private View of Canadians in the Great War* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 1992); and Joyce Kennedy, *Distant thunder: Canada's Citizen Soldiers on the Western Front* (Manhattan, KS: Sunflower University Press, 2000).

When the opportunity arose to put his degree to use as a bombardier, he enrolled in the 6th Brigade as part of the Second Contingent.

Chapters Seven to Thirteen cover Sargent's journey from Montréal to Britain on the RMS *Megantic* in March 1915 to his arrival in France in January 1916. Grout gives a precise account of the 2nd Canadian Division's numerous activities, which included games of shuffleboard, cards, chess and checkers, and their interaction with civilians over the twelve-day voyage. In one intense diary excerpt, gunner Robert Hale writes about how in the midst of a forceful storm the waves brought another ship, the *SS Vaderland*, within twenty yards of crashing into the *Megantic*. Another intriguing excerpt focuses on a boxing match on deck, for which Grout provides a photograph (p. 73). Grout's imaginative descriptions exemplify his affinity for writing the social histories of cruise ships, which is hardly surprising considering his past experience with the subject in RMS *Empress of Ireland*.² When the brigade finally reached Liverpool, they were relocated to Shorncliffe, a military camp in southeastern England. It is only once they arrived that the brigade discovered the War Office had actually requested the Canadian Field Ambulance and received them by mistake. Not yet needed at the front, they were instead reorganised and relegated to a reserve brigade where they spent the next ten months training, socialising, travelling, and quelling drunken disputes and local disturbances in nearby towns. This section also introduces novel and unconventional forms of warfare. One of these stories involves a zeppelin attack over Otterpool while Sargent was stationed there in October 1915. On a return raid from London, the attack killed just over a dozen soldiers and injured many more, reminding soldiers that dangers were present even away from the battlefield.

Chapters Fourteen to Twenty-nine begin with the brigade finally arriving in France and highlight Sargent's involvement in notable battles at the Somme, Arras, Ypres, and Passchendaele. Grout makes clear he is determined to put the war experience at the forefront. As the now 6th Howitzer Brigade rejoined the Second Contingent on the battlefield, Grout describes how "[w]hen the wind shifted, the stench from the trench could be smelled miles away. It was a nauseating mixture of excrement, urine, cordite, smoke, chloride of

² Derek Grout, *Empress of Ireland: The Story of an Edwardian Liner* (Toronto: Tempus Publishing Ltd, 2001).

lime, and the stink of unburied bodies that littered No Man's Land" (p. 162). This gritty portrayal reflects Grout's writing style in these chapters, as well as reinforces his thesis of the special dangers faced by artillery gunners. Statistical uncertainties and divisional variation make comparison across military positions difficult, but Grout presents several reasoned arguments for the battery's thirty-six per cent casualty rate. Infantry rotations consisted of four or five days, while artillerymen could spend a month or more on the line. By the end of the war, shell production standards had established a complex inspection system, whereas earlier defective shells that reached the front ran the risk of exploding while being loaded. Grout brings to light the need to fully assess inconsistencies in casualty rates for future researchers.

The final seven chapters cover from the Battle of Amiens at the beginning of the Hundred Days Campaign to Bert's return to Canada in May 1919. Grout takes the opportunity in these chapters to introduce a few stories of Sargent's valour. When Canadian infantry advanced beyond the range of artillery bombardment during the attack on Broulon Wood, he embarked on a solo mission to gather reconnaissance on the batteries' locations north of the Canal du Nord for which he was awarded the Military Cross. However, his chapters on the Hundred Days Campaign can feel somewhat anticlimactic, partly because of the denser and more technical writing of these later battles, and partly because of the unexpectedly engaging chapters on Sargent's time in Britain.

Sargent's years of withstanding the deafening howl of shellfire are carefully balanced in the text alongside a love story which develops through Bert's romance with Rosalie James. Bert first met Rosalie in Britain while part of the reserve brigade in 1915 and after his departure to the front they began to write each other. Bert visited Rosalie in Britain each time he was posted on leave. They began writing, on average, every other day, and on Bert's second return in July 1917 he proposed to Rosalie. Three months before the Armistice was announced, they married in Britain at Mundesley-on-Sea, and returned to Canada together in May 1919.

Grout's research is informed by some of the major texts on British and Canadian involvement in the First World War and also draws from the secondary literature available on the operational use of artillery in both the British and Canadian contexts. His integration of photographs, letters, and diary excerpts from Sargent's collection

places primary evidence front and centre. However, bibliographical citations and page numerations from the diaries are not provided. There are also areas where further secondary research could have offered greater insight into certain sections, especially those on wartime industry and society. The omission of Jonathan Vance's *Maple Leaf Empire* is especially surprising, and could have served as an invaluable source to expand on Canadian soldiers' activities during their time in Britain.³ Nevertheless, these are largely periphery to Sargent's story and their exclusion does not interrupt the flow of Grout's overall narrative.

While taking into account the book's public audience, there are a few points of criticism. Grout does not offer a significant amount of analysis to accompany accounts from Sargent's diary and letters. Discussion of soldiers' grooming and daily routines might better be contextualised through the lens of masculinity, while a broader societal correlation could be drawn between Sargent's middle-class background, his university education, and his enlistment in the Artillery. But Grout's objective is captivating historical storytelling, and he succeeds remarkably in doing so, making Sargent's insights on the war more accessible to contemporary readers.

Derek Grout's *Thunder in the Skies* is a compelling read and is likely to appeal to a broad audience. It contributes to the increasing body of literature on the lived experiences of Canadian soldiers, and is highly recommended for military enthusiasts as well as academic military historians who wish to pursue further research on diaries written during the First World War.

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³ Jonathan Vance, *Maple Leaf Empire: Canada, Britain, and Two World Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).