

J. Brent Wilson. *A Family of Brothers: Soldiers of the 26th New Brunswick Battalion in the Great War*. Fredericton, New Brunswick: Goose Lane Editions, 2018. Pp. 296.

An important aspect of the growing catalogue of Canadian First World War scholarship has been the exploration of themes relating to commemoration and memory. With the recent passing of the centenary anniversary of the end of the war, academic study of the conflict has broadened to include the lasting impacts of the “War to End All Wars,” how it relates to modern society, and what lessons can be derived from the descent into total war. Part of this shift has been an increase in locally-focused texts that highlight the ways in which the unfolding of the conflict played out in specific regions or within social groups in Canada. An intrigued public has been asked to reflect on their own connections with the war, which had a profound influence in shaping modern society. While these trends are certainly not unique to recent literature, the centenary has aided in amplifying these types of works. It is in this historiographical context that J. Brent Wilson tells the story of the 26th New Brunswick Battalion. He explores the themes of combat, valour, and strategy, while also telling a smaller, localised story of the “Fighting 26th.”

From a structural perspective, Wilson’s book follows the familiar pattern established in contemporary First World War scholarship, seeking to balance broader thematic explorations of the conflict with the more personal experience of soldiers, both on and off the front, and applies it to the story of the 26th New Brunswick Battalion. The narrative moves from the battalion’s 1914 mobilisation in Saint John, New Brunswick, across the Atlantic to England before finally arriving on the Western Front in late 1915 where it stayed until 1919 following its participation in the occupation of the German Rhineland. Along the way, Wilson takes the customary pit stops to discuss topics of interest, including the 26th’s prowess in trench raiding, the process of reinforcing the frontline battalion, and how the men coped with daily life. Using a combination of traditional military sources, such as combat records and formation histories, and more personal sources, such as diary entries, letters home, and contemporary interviews conducted with returning combatants, Wilson constructs a cohesive narrative that offers a balance between the tactics and strategies used by the battalion and the experiences of the soldiers carrying out those instructions. By utilising local newspapers and the personal

records of soldiers, such as notices of leave, health check-ups, and correspondence with family back home, Wilson ties the story of the battalion to the story of New Brunswick, ensuring that the provincial character of the narrative is reflective of the provincial character of the battalion.

In doing so, Wilson attempts to capture the dual characteristic of the battalion: both as a composite unit of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) (and the British Expeditionary Force at-large), and as the pride of New Brunswick. The struggle to balance these two sides of the battalion is demonstrative of the real-life challenges faced by the battalion, as well as other regionally-designated units in the CEF. How does a battalion facing constant attrition and wastage preserve its regional identity while relying solely on volunteers? It is this question that ties Wilson's work to larger questions being asked within Canadian scholarship on the war. Much has been written about the composition of the various units within the CEF and how this regionalism—a phenomenon made famous by the British Pals Battalions—affected battalion performance and identity.¹ Wilson's text makes useful contributions to these works by exploring the ways in which the 26th's experience was shaped by carrying the New Brunswick designation. Key examples of this are the inclusion of the sporting successes of the 26th Battalion told alongside its battlefield exploits and recounting the stories told by discharged officers and men who returned to New Brunswick and spoke about their experiences in the battalion. These give the narrative a real sense of place and highlight that thoughts of home were never far for the soldiers.

These intimate moments lend the story of the 26th a personal feeling, treating the battalion's experience as unique and visceral, thus allowing the reader to become more familiar with the personnel. In turn, this adds emotional weight to the more daring elements of the narrative, such as the battalion's experience at the Somme, the

¹ See, for example, Matt Baker, "'The List of the Nation's Heroes': Voluntary Enlistment in Chatham, Ontario 1914-1916," *Canadian Military History* 24, no. 1 (2015): 141-180; Paul Maroney, "'The Great Adventure': The Context and Ideology of Recruiting in Ontario, 1914-17," *The Canadian Historical Review* 77, no. 1 (1996): 62-98; Jean Martin, "Francophone Enlistment in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1918: The Evidence," *Canadian Military History* 25, no. 1 (2016): 1-12; Chris Sharpe, "Enlistment in the Canadian Expeditionary Force 1914-1918: A Re-evaluation," *Canadian Military History* 24, no. 1 (2015): 17-60; and Jonathan F. Vance, "Provincial Patterns of Enlistment in the Canadian Expeditionary Force," *Canadian Military History* 17, no. 2 (2008): 75-78.

loss of its commander at the Battle of the Scarpe, and its relentless drive during the Hundred Days Offensive. Cumulatively, this offers the reader a chance to experience these events along with the soldiers, giving the book a fresh and unique take on the First World War. That said, this familiarity and intimacy also serves as the book's downfall in places. Wilson's intention behind the work is clearly to tell the story of the New Brunswick Battalion for those familiar both with New Brunswick and the major moments of the war in general. Very little space is dedicated to exploring the big picture aspect, leaving many key moments lacking broader context. For those with a working knowledge of the conflict, this background will not be missed, but for those with a limited understanding of the war, the narrative may feel somewhat choppy. An example of this is the movement from one battle to another without a clear sense of how these engagements fit into the war as a whole. While this could be defended as another means of putting readers firmly in the shoes of the battalion—frontline soldiers were often denied broad strategic information—additional context for the where and why of certain battles would not be unwelcome. Wilson also assumes readers have a working knowledge of New Brunswick, specifically relating to geography and the social make-up of the province. While most references are rarely more than passing remarks, those without this background may not take away as much from the story as someone familiar with New Brunswick. Overall, these two critiques do not demand anything more than a brief acknowledgement. For those who are not familiar with New Brunswick looking to break into scholarship on the First World War, this may not be the best point of entry, but beyond this small demographic, the listed problems are negligible.

A Family of Brothers offers a compelling, intimate addition to the growing historiography of the First World War. In merging a known narrative structure and tone that dominates the literature with an earned familiarity, Wilson does his subject justice by enhancing the story he is telling through how he tells it. The book contains all of the heroism and valour expected, but manages to inject a unique authorial voice that formidably grounds the work in both New Brunswick and the "Fighting 26th." While perhaps not the most accessible entry point into First World War scholarship, those who are interested in exploring the smaller moments and the smaller stories of the conflict will find a lot to enjoy in this book. This sentiment rings especially true if the reader has any ties to the province, for it is clear that

Wilson's ultimate goal with this work is to show that whether you are from Saint John or Shippagan, New Brunswickers ought to be proud of their province's contribution to the Great War.

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