

Cook, Tim. *The Secret History of Soldiers: How Canadians Survived the Great War*. Toronto: Allen Lane. 2018. Pp 480.

Tim Cook's *The Secret History of Soldiers: How Canadians Survived the Great War* delivers a unique and important contribution to our understanding of Canada's First World War experience. Through an incredible amount of primary source research and what seems like an endless roll of firsthand accounts, Cook is able to fashion an intimate understanding of the day to day experiences of the average Canadian soldier. For anyone familiar with Cook's work, this book is a culmination of years of academic discoveries through his numerous pieces on the First World War and it does not disappoint. There has never been a book like this in Canadian military history, a vivid and thoughtful window into the variety of coping mechanisms Canadian soldiers used to survive the horrors of trench warfare. Cook argues that through these varied and numerous coping mechanisms Canadian soldiers developed a unique soldiers' culture, one that allowed them to make sense of the violent world around them, forge powerful bonds with one another while also providing a conduit for challenging the established military hierarchy. What is perhaps most intriguing is that while the war was brutal and damaging for so many, Cook shows that there were aspects of the war experience, specifically rooted in this unique soldiers' culture, which veterans sought to actively remember and retain in the post-war period (and even miss!). A complicated and at times uncomfortable conclusion to be faced with for anyone familiar with the damaging effects of the First World War.

Cook divides his book into chapters focusing on a variety of themes or categories that made up this unique soldiers' culture. He begins by exploring the various ways in which soldiers dealt with the physical realities of their home in the trenches. Numerous methods were used by the soldiers to acclimate themselves to life in the front line, from naming trenches after familiar geographical locations back in Canada to a macabre embrace of the dead (in an aptly titled second chapter named Death Culture). The exploration of death culture in particular, much of which was first published in an earlier article by Cook is a raw and psychologically stirring look into how

humans are able to cope with unprecedented levels of stress and the ever present realities of death.<sup>1</sup>

After Cook establishes the broad parameters for a soldiers' culture he then dives into more specific aspects of life for the average Canadian soldier. He looks at the use of language, specifically in regards to various forms of slang and swearing, arguing that while much of what the Canadians said and much of how they swore were similar to their British cousins, a nascent sense of Canadianness was developing within the language of the trenches. From here Cook devotes a chapter each to the importance of music, storytelling, letters from home, trench newspapers, cartoons, souveneering and trench art (much of which was pulled from Cook's own 2012 article), activities while in the rear areas and finally the interesting phenomenon of the numerous acting troupes which sprung up throughout the Canadian Corps (and the rest of the BEF).<sup>2</sup> Cook clearly shows how important these various categories of culture were in allowing soldiers to cope with the strain of trench warfare and thus in fact became crucial to the mental well-being of the men. Even their officers and the senior leadership of the Canadian Corps came to realize how important this soldiers' culture was in keeping up morale. This realization by the leadership class meant that various aspects of this culture, from music, to trench newspapers, to cartoons and even various performances by acting troupes, provided a platform for the regular Canadian soldier to challenge and even criticize their leaders in a manner which fell within acceptable boundaries of regular military discipline. Cook states, for instance, that trench newspapers in particular were "seen by both officers and rankers as a way for the lower ranks to negotiate officers' authority rather than as a negation of it" (219).

What is perhaps most striking about Cook's manuscript is the final chapter, titled "Entrenched Culture," which seeks to explain how so much of this unique soldiers' culture was maintained in the post-war years. Yet, even while veterans sought to ensure the survival of much of this culture Canadian society at large slowly pushed the memory of the First World War into the private and secluded world of Royal Canadian Legion Halls as the memory of the war shifted

<sup>1</sup> Tim Cook, "Grave Beliefs: Stories of the Supernatural and the Uncanny among Canada's Great War Trench Soldiers," *The Journal of Military History* 77, no. 2 (2013): 521-542.

<sup>2</sup> Tim Cook, "Tokens of Fritz" *War and Society* 31, no. 3 (2012): 211-226.

from a great war for civilization to a horrific and tragic mistake that sowed the seeds of the Second World War. Many veterans, however, held on to “two seemingly conflicting ideas about the war in their hearts; it was a dreadful slaughter and it was also a titanic event that revealed the best about themselves and their comrades. For many, the redemptive qualities of service and camaraderie were sought after, embraced, and celebrated long after the war” (357).

This book is one about agency. It shows that Canadian soldiers were not simply victims of the Western Front meat grinder but that they displayed resiliency and agency in their day-to-day experience. This resiliency and agency, Cook effectively and articulately shows, came from the development of a unique soldiers’ culture. The only aspect of Cook’s argument that begs further exploration is his position that this unique soldiers’ culture contributed to an idea of post-war Canadianness that was forged during the war. Certainly the First World War is a watershed moment in the story of Canadian nationalism and identity yet this private and unique culture was not transmitted to the broader population as a whole, in fact, as Cook shows, it was shunted to the dingy confines of legion halls with only one day of the year to escape. Thus this veterans’ sub-culture may have contributed to a sense of Canadianness amongst those sharing said culture, but it is difficult to see how it contributed to a broader sense of Canadian identity amongst the far greater numbers that had no access to it or understanding of it. Nonetheless this book is a remarkable first-of-its-kind exploration into the lives of the soldiers of the Canadian Corps. Tim Cook remains, rightfully, one of our most celebrated military historians who is constantly leading the way in opening up new avenues of exploration into the Canadian war experience. He has always sought to transcend the isolated battlefield analyses which once characterized military history and connect war to deeper issues of society and culture. Once again, he has achieved his objectives.