

## *Book Reviews*

**Guarding the Goldfields: The Story of the Yukon Field Force.** BRERETON GREENHOUS, ed. Toronto and Oxford: Dundurn Press, 1987. In collaboration with the Canadian War Museum, Canadian Museum of Civilization, National Museums of Canada (Canadian War Museum Historical Publication No. 24). 215 p. ISBN 1-55002-028-5 \$24.95.

The editor of this book also authored the bare-bones, eighty-word entry on the Yukon Field Force (YFF) in *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. In the present book, he has taken the opportunity to flesh out that tombstone description with information gathered from an exhaustive search of primary and secondary sources. Yet, for the reader approaching the book from the brief encyclopedia entry, a question that begs an answer remains: why a book about a Canadian military unit that existed for a mere two years and never fired a shot in anger? Though the lifespan of the Yukon Field Force was shorter than that of the Pacific salmon on which the troops feasted during their trek to the goldfields, the times into which they were spawned have become known as one of the most fascinating periods of Canadian history. Brereton Greenhous attempts to use the YFF as the focus of a study which delves into an ambitious number of associated themes and issues. His introduction and postscript expose the reader to such diverse topics as the history of the Yukon and the Klondike, the state of the Canadian militia, Canadian sovereignty in the North, and the origins and activities of the Victorian Order of Nurses. As well, he provides biographical material on the two main figures around whom the book is shaped, Edward Lester and Faith Fenton.

The configuration of the work is somewhat unusual. Greenhous has interwoven the accounts of three contemporary witnesses of the journey undertaken by the Yukon Field Force in the spring of 1898. Edward Lester, a member of the force and diarist whose observations are reproduced in their entirety; Faith Fenton, assigned by the Toronto Globe to cover the Force on its trip to the Yukon; and Georgia Powell, one of four VON nurses selected to provide medical attention to the thousands of gold seekers in the Klondike, each contribute written accounts of their experiences. These individuals offer different perspectives on the journey from Vancouver to Dawson. Lester's account comprises nearly one-half of the book's contents and includes entries for the winter he spent stationed at Fort Selkirk. An additional section of the book which serves as a bridge between the three contemporary accounts and Greenhous' analysis of historical events and themes is the article by Gerald Cumming describing the acquisition by the National

Archives of Canada of the Lester diary and the subsequent detective work that established the identity of the author.

One of the delights of this book is the opportunity it provides to enjoy once again the article first offered to readers of *Archivaria* 17. "Archival Detective Work: The Case of the Yukon Field Force" is the type of story that illustrates to non-archivists the value of tenacious research as well as the rewards such work can produce, including the discovery of intriguing human drama amid seemingly lifeless archival documents. The article provides a lesson for members of the archival profession as well. This reviewer defies even the most jaded archivist to read the original article or the "extract" found in this publication and avoid the sense of excitement produced by unexpected discovery that our work can sometimes elicit.

While the editor does a great service by dedicating the book to Gerald Cumming and by reproducing his article, in the view of this reviewer, he does commit a disservice to the original work by providing only extracts. Those portions excised contain crucial evidence in the archival detective case so carefully, and in one particular instance, luckily solved by Cumming. Greenhous has chosen not to publish a six-page section of the Cumming article yet he uses this information as the underpinnings of his own postscript to the life of Edward Lester. Although the changes were made to retain the chronological flow of the narrative, it was done without acknowledging the original source. While this undoubtedly was an unintentional omission, the Cumming find of Department of Justice Capital Case files, certain records of the Department of Militia and Defence, and finally the crucial Reference File 1536 in the Manuscript Division, National Archives, that led to the discovery of Lester's pension records and subsequently provided evidence which filled in the previously impenetrable blank in his life story, should have been cited as emanating from the original *Archivaria* article.

As a work of history, the book is a disappointment. Greenhous does a commendable job in crafting an artistic success, but fails to deliver a product with real substance. The editor has blended his own general analysis of historical events with contemporary sketches and the archival investigation into the provenance of the Lester diary. As well, he has laced the book with numerous maps and photographs which provide strong visual evidence of both the journey northward and of those who undertook it. The main failure of the book, however, stems from the heart of the work, the eye-witness accounts of the two main characters. The pedestrian views of Edward Lester and Faith Fenton reveal little beyond repetitive versions of the "getting there" and not enough of the author's own expectations or interpretations of the underlying "whys" of the journey. Lester is the most interesting of the two; his diary is a unique document written by the YFF member who had the distinction of being last to leave the Yukon. Yet, for all his first-hand accounts of the soldier's life "north of 60," Lester occupies a position on the periphery of one of the greatest events in Canadian history. He contributes little to our knowledge of developments in the Klondike. Greenhous admits the obvious fact of the gradual decline of the diary entries and it "plainly reflects the unutterable boredom and monotony of a Yukon winter spent 300 kilometres from the bright, if tawdry, lights of Dawson" (p. 12).

The despatches of Faith Fenton, *Globe* reporter, are far from news. Although these reports do cover the gaps in Lester's account of the journey from Vancouver to Dawson, there is also much duplication, making for repetitive descriptions of scenery and mosquitoes. There are, unfortunately, far too few insights into events. Fenton described

her own efforts, quite correctly as “an impressionistic sketch of the trip together” (p. 161). A great disappointment of her work is that, as a woman selected by a major newspaper to undertake such an arduous journey to the frontiers of Canadian territory in what was the height of the Victorian era, she does not present a very distinctive feminine perspective. There are some redeeming features, such as her descriptions of her travelling companions and her observations of various methods of transportation of humans and their supplies, but beyond these little in her writing distinguishes it from any of the hundreds of travelogues that abound.

If the book could be done over, the editor would be wiser to take extracts from the two contemporary accounts, reproduce the Cumming article in its entirety, and expand his own analysis of the Canadian militia and their role in the Yukon. As it stands, *Guarding the Goldfields* does not fulfil the promise of its title. The goldfields and the Yukon Field Force never really meet in this work.

Doug Whyte  
National Archives of Canada

**Le 22<sup>e</sup> Bataillon (canadien-français) 1914-1919 Étude socio-militaire.** JEAN-PIERRE GAGNON. Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval en collaboration avec le Ministère de la Défense nationale et le Centre d'édition du gouvernement du Canada, 1986. 460 p. ISBN 2-7637-7097-5 \$29.00.

The organization of the 22nd (French Canadian) Battalion in October 1914 enjoyed neither public nor official favour. This unit, the only francophone battalion in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, owed its existence to the determination of Arthur Mignault, a wealthy Conservative medical doctor and Captain of the 65th Regiment. Mignault was backed by a bipartisan committee composed of Sir Wilfrid Laurier, Sir Lomer Gouin, Médéric Martin, and other French Canadian notables, as well as the unflagging efforts of the newspaper *La Presse*. Established to refute British charges of French Canadian disloyalty and apathy toward the war, this battalion's war record went well beyond the most optimistic expectations of its promoters. Its record included two Victoria and forty-six Military Crosses, and twenty-seven Distinguished Service Medals. Despite innumerable obstacles, its performance during the battles of Mount Sorrel, Courcelette, Regina Trench, Chérisy, Ypres, and Passchendaele made the name of the 22nd Battalion synonymous with military discipline, skill, and courage. In 1920, in recognition of its singular wartime record, 22nd Battalion (along with the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry) became an integral part of Canada's permanent military force.

Jean-Pierre Gagnon's *Le 22<sup>e</sup> Bataillon (canadien-français) 1914-1919* is neither a regimental history nor an hagiographical study, but a careful socio-military analysis of the organization, recruitment, training, life, and battle experience of the 22nd Battalion during the Great War. Originally presented as a doctoral thesis at Laval University,