

In Search of the Fighting Newfoundlander

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REVIEW ESSAYS

In Search of the Fighting Newfoundlander

MAARTEN GERRITSEN

THE CARNAGE OF WORLD WAR I changed Newfoundland. When the debt for the conflict came due during the Great Depression, it was too much for the small dominion to bear; responsible government itself was surrendered by a near bankrupt state. The loss of lives, more than 1500 young soldiers, out of a total population of less than 250,000, added to sentiment among subsequent generations that Newfoundlanders had paid too high a price in the futile “war to end all wars.” Yet, despite these costs, notions of war as a glorious and noble undertaking survived. Newfoundland emerged from the war with a heightened sense of its national identity. In this, the island dominion was, of course, not alone. Many former British colonies came to see their participation in World War I as a stepping stone in their transition from colony to nation. More often than not, these nationalist interpretations of the war focused on a single exciting and dramatic engagement. To this day, many Australians recount the attack on the beaches of Gallipoli as the moment of the country’s national awakening. Similarly, many Canadians view the victory at Vimy Ridge (Easter Monday 1917) as second only to 1 July 1867 as a critical juncture in the development of a new, independent Canadian nation.

Newfoundland servicemen had much to be proud of, but the iconic center piece of Newfoundland's World War I effort was undoubtedly the attack near Beaumont Hamel on 1 July 1916. The sacrifice of that morning, although only a small part of the much larger Somme offensive, has come to symbolize the island's World War I effort. Yet, despite the continuing popularity of Beaumont Hamel as a national benchmark, only a few books have been written about Newfoundlanders' role in World War I. Therefore, the recent publication of three diaries — two written by soldiers and one by a nurse — and the reissue of an out-of-print history of the Newfoundland Regiment are a welcome addition to the local literature.

Written in 1963, Gerald W.L. Nicholson's, *The Fighting Newfoundlander* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's Press, 2006) remains the only full length history of the Newfoundland regiment written by a professional historian. While in the years following the war many countries commissioned official histories of their war experience, no such plans existed in Newfoundland. It was not until the 1960s, nearing the 50th anniversary of Beaumont Hamel, that the Newfoundland government contracted Nicholson to write this history. Before Nicholson embarked on the Newfoundland project he was employed by the Historical section of the Canadian Army and had written *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919: Official history of the Canadian Army in the First World War* (Ottawa: R. Duhamel, Queen's Printer and Controller of Stationery, 1962). Although *The Fighting Newfoundlander* is a complete history of the island's military history, nearly three quarters of the book is devoted to World War I.

Nicholson's work is not only a historical narrative, it is also a monument to those who served during World War I. In his introduction he claims the Regiment was unparalleled: "Here was a contingent whose ranks were filled almost exclusively by men sharing a common loyalty to the island Colony of their birth and upbringing. The very manner of their raising was unique" (xv). Although Newfoundland may not have had any official military organization, the island, according to Nicholson, jumped at the chance to come to the aid of the mother country. The presence of military style youth organizations helped initial enlistment, and more than half of the initial volunteers came from the Church Lad's Brigade, the Methodist Guards, the Catholic Cadet Corps, and the Newfoundland Highlanders.

After a few weeks of training the first 500 volunteers left their drill and basic instruction camp in Pleasantville and marched off to the *Florizel* in St. John's harbour. On parade through the city, the new recruits encountered enthusiastic crowds. For their part, the soldiers were equally enthusiastic, eager to get at the enemy before the war was over. However, once in Britain they had nine months of drill and exercises before they were assigned active duty. While the Canadian Expeditionary Force embarked for France in February 1915, the Newfoundlanders were held back until that summer. When they finally received orders to embark, Nicholson suggests, few soldiers cared where they were going. In the end the regiment was not sent to fight the Germans on the Western Front. Instead, they faced the Turks on

Gallipoli, a small peninsula in the Aegean. While the attack on Gallipoli in April 1915 has become the symbol of Australia's emerging nationhood, the day of the landings now a national holiday, the Newfoundlanders' arrival on the peninsula nearly six months later is hardly remembered. Eager to prove their mettle, the Newfoundlanders had to wait until the last few days of action to distinguish themselves, when they covered the withdrawal of Australian and British troops (188).

Although Gallipoli may have been the regiment's first taste of war, it was not the last, for it soon engaged in the ill-fated attack at Beaumont Hamel. Unfortunately, when it came time to attack, the regiment was thrown into battle at the wrong place and the wrong time, leading to horrendous casualties. The losses were so high that, after the battle, those in charge suggested the battalion be removed from the battlefield, an unprecedented move. Although the regiment never left France, Nicholson suggested that 1 July 1916 had been such a bloody day that "[f]rom the city of St. John's down to the smallest, most remote outpost, there was scarcely a family that did not have the loss of some loved one to mourn" (282).

In the manner of official histories, Nicholson's work is detailed, listing every engagement and numbering all the casualties. It is also largely descriptive, uncritical and lacking in analysis. The fact that the Newfoundland government commissioned the work as a memorial to those who made the ultimate sacrifice undoubtedly discouraged a critical assessment of the regiment's war record. As is typical of his generation of military historians, also missing from Nicholson's narrative are the voices and experiences of the men who did the fighting and dying. Although Nicholson interviewed a number of veterans and read many unpublished letters and diaries, he only mentions the names and experiences of officers (and those enlisted men who received a decoration for bravery). David Facey-Crowther's new introduction, written especially for the 2006 reprint, does little to address this lack of analysis. Rather than place the island's war experiences in the context of other dominions, Facey-Crowther chooses to focus on Nicholson's credentials as an historian and the reasons behind the original publication.

Facey-Crowther could have chosen to do otherwise since he is clearly able to. His work on the published diary of Owen Steele, *Lieutenant Owen William Steele of the Newfoundland Regiment* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002), is of a different kind. Eloquent and well-written, the introduction compares Steele's battlefield experiences to similar accounts, suggesting that Steele's observations were shared by millions of other soldiers. The informative introductions to each individual chapter often compare Steele's observations with those of other soldiers serving under similar conditions, making this publication one of the best of its kind. The decision to put the notes explaining some of the details in the letters at the end of the book is helpful to readers who want to follow Steele's story and do not want to be distracted by endless details on the family members and friends mentioned in his letters. On top of that, the simple and sober black and white dust jacket seems fitting for a man who, while fervently believing

in the righteousness of his cause, was aware of the dangers and risks associated with modern warfare.

According to Facey-Crowther, bringing the personal war accounts of Lieutenant Owen Steele to a wider group of readers than the family has been a lengthy process. Steele's younger sister tried to have her brothers' letters published as early as the 1920s, but it took another 80 years before his writings finally found the audience they deserve. In his letters and diary, Steele comes across as an intelligent and caring soldier who never lost faith in the cause for which he would ultimately sacrifice his life, even though he often wrote of the boredom and grinding routine connected with trench life. The fact that, as an officer, Steele was responsible for censoring his own letters, allows us a more unobstructed insight into the complex mind of a front line soldier than similar accounts from enlisted men. The complexity of sentiments is best represented in the letter he wrote on the eve of Beaumont Hamel, the last letter he would write. On the one hand he expressed high hopes for the upcoming offensive, while on the other he shows his concern about the severe losses that would result. The letter also displays a desire to reassure loved ones at home. "The loss of Kitchener and his Staff was certainly a great blow to all; however, I believe the climax of our troubles will be reached within the next few days, (after which the day of peace will quickly draw near), though they undoubtedly will bring trouble to many. Jim and I are in the best of spirits, and I trust we remain so. This will be my last letter for a short while" (189).

Because Steele was killed by a shell a few days after the carnage of 1 July, his writings reveal nothing of the horrors and mounting pressures faced by the soldiers who continued to fight during the remainder of the war. Fortunately for us, Corporal Curtis Forsey lived on and his letters have been published in a collection edited by Bert Riggs under the title; *Grand Bank Soldier: The War Letter of Lance Corporal Curtis Forsey* (St. John's: Flanker Press, 2005). A student at Mount Allison when war broke out in 1914, Forsey included in the letters he sent to his parents back in Grand Bank graphic details about the war. He also groused and grumbled about the hardships of military life and often wondered why people would chose soldiering as a profession (14).

One of the reasons Forsey's letters provide insight into the grim realities of trench warfare is because he saw a great deal of it. Although Forsey only enlisted in 1917, he withstood numerous attacks and went "over the top" at least twice. While most soldiers, like Steele, were careful in what they chose to write so as not to worry loved ones at home, Forsey sometimes included graphic descriptions of the war. After a German artillery attack he wrote, "I got buried in and my knee skinned that was all I got hurt, but the cries of the dying and the wounded hurt me a lot more" (59). In July 1918 he discussed his new job as a Lewis gunner. "It's a very destructive weapon. I've seen them fall like sheep in front of it, so I'm going to try and see what I can do when we get in again" (105-106).

Although Forsey was capable of describing the horrors of trench warfare to his father (significantly, he never did so to his mother), the hardships and grinding routine of the trenches took their toll on him. Rather than complain about the pain of the shrapnel wound he received in the fall of 1918, Forsey expressed relief and contentment that the injury would keep him out of the trenches for a while. "You can hardly imagine my feelings when I got hit. To think I was getting away from it (I don't mean I was afraid) for a rest" (133). Claiming he was not sorry for his experiences, Forsey could nevertheless hardly wait for his release from the army. On the eve of his departure from England, he wrote to his mother urging her to have a "suit of civies all pressed up for me, also a shirt & collar and tie, Don't forget" (146).

Perhaps surprisingly, the letters of Frances Cluett, a nurse from Belleoram, are not only more graphic, but also more desperate in their depiction of grief and suffering caused by the war. In Bill Rompkey and Bert Riggs, eds., *Your daughter Fanny: The War Letters of Frances Cluett, VAD* (St. John's: Flanker Press, 2006) she meticulously describes the hardships she faced in hospitals in England and the casualty clearing stations behind the front lines. At the age of 33, Cluett was older than Steele or Forsey when she enlisted, and perhaps this maturity explains her honesty about the horrors she faced on a daily basis. In letters to her mother and sister Cluett admitted freely that she found her duties extremely taxing and often wondered if she would make it through her shifts. "I have stood by many a bedside in the middle of the night, with lights darkened, watching for the last breath, then put screens around him, and in addition to that, the rats would rush underneath the bed with a swish. I do not think about them mother; but I shall never forget some of the most piteous sights that ever could possibly be" (114).

More so than Steele and Forsey, Cluett offers a view of the suffering. Supervising a ward of 26 beds, she often felt overwhelmed and guilty for not being able to provide adequate care. During major offensives the numbers of wounded could pile so high that many would die for the want of attention (149). Even for soldiers who survived their first few days in hospital, the road to recovery could be agonizingly painful and Cluett often cursed the harsh treatment methods used on severely wounded soldiers (72). Yet, amidst this sadness Cluett expressed surprise at her patients' compassion and lack of self-pity, as even severely wounded soldiers tried to be upbeat and make life as easy as possible for the nurses around them.

Although the editors should be commended for making Forsey and Cluett's insightful and valuable letters available to a larger audience, there are some points of criticism. Neither book has an introduction that places the letters in the context of the burgeoning literature on the soldiers' and nurses' experiences. The editors also make little effort to place the letters in the context of Newfoundland's participation in World War I, but opt to include a complex and confusing family history of their subjects. There are also hundreds of footnotes which do little to aid the reader in engaging with the letters, and whose relevance more generally is not always clear.

Despite these criticisms, the personal writings of Steel, Forsey, and Cluett testify to the strength, courage, and resilience displayed by the thousands of Newfoundlanders who served. However, rather than see these attributes as symbols of Newfoundland itself, as Mary Philpott does in her afterword to Cluett's letters, it might be better to demonstrate the commonalities between these figures and the hundreds of thousands of other young volunteers who enlisted all over the empire. Although Steele, Forsey, and Cluett each experienced the war in their own unique way, their stories also share many similarities. All three were born in the same colony and all wondered if they would see their island again. They often found it difficult to relate their experiences to those who had stayed behind, and while they sometime wrote about the war they faced, more often than not they wrote home urging their family members to provide them with news from home, as way of escaping the madness in front of them. In doing so they were no different than thousands of other soldiers in that war. Perhaps it is only out of comparison with soldiers of other nations that a more definitive and coherent version of Newfoundland's Great War veterans' experience can be compiled.

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