

## Sydney Frost, Edited and annotated by Edward Roberts. *A Blue Puttee at War: The Memoir of Captain Sydney Frost, MC*

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economies operated under the rubric of capitalism. Historically, although subject to class distinctions, the province's urban centres overwhelmingly directed the movement of capital and resources within the province and embraced a market-based model that encouraged competition. Conversely, residents of the bays and inlets (or outports) were subjected to the truck system until well into the twentieth century, which significantly contributed to a form of economic oppression that often resulted in abject poverty. This historical circumstance suggests that the need for collaboration, and indeed acts of kindness, between rural community members was important to the overall survival of communities. This point tends to favour Firestone's notion of "social capital" rather than the DLS hypothesis. Arguably, the culture and traditions developed and transmitted amid the adverse economic conditions that existed in outport Newfoundland are different from those that developed in urban centres. Of course, many other considerations would be required to establish contemporary and historical distinctions between rural and urban existence in Newfoundland, and such an undertaking is a study unto itself.

Overall, this is an interesting and thought-provoking book that draws on a number of concepts (such as altruism, kindness, hedonism, and identity) and utilizes specific social-cultural and economic contexts to establish more advanced perspectives on kindness and its value as a feature of society. The book is appropriate for academic studies at the second-year level and beyond, and provides a number of new and interesting topics for future research.

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Sydney Frost, Edited and annotated by Edward Roberts. *A Blue Puttee at War: The Memoir of Captain Sydney Frost, MC* (St John's: Flanker Press, 2014).

Newfoundland and Labrador has been well served by memoirs of the First World War. John Gallishaw, Mayo Lind, Owen Steele, and others have provided windows into the perceptions of enlisted men and officers who served in the

Royal Newfoundland Regiment. The recently published memoir of Sydney Frost stands out among this strong company in several respects. First of all, Gallishaw left the regiment after Gallipoli, and others, such as Steele, were killed in action shortly after Beaumont Hamel. So Frost is the only memoirist among the Blue Puttees who survived the whole of the war. A couple of periods in hospital and leave meant that he was not with his regiment every day of the fighting. Yet his perspective on the war is invaluable and remarkably complete.

Long after the war, Frost served as a sort of unofficial regimental historian, and his reflections from later decades make up this posthumously published document. His book is a palimpsest. In part it is a memoir, relying on his memory of events of which he was a witness and participant from a later vantage point. Frost also quoted from some of his letters home from the front, giving the reader some of his more immediate impressions. In part, Frost's book is also a historical account that he reconstructed from the documentation he assembled during and after the war. As an officer he was in a position to collect some of the paperwork generated by the Army. So he drew upon his memory, and his research, to write an account that is personal but emphasizes the contribution of his fellow soldiers.

In places, Frost quotes from G.W.L Nicholson's official history of the Regiment, much as many historians would do. But this is not a typical example of a historian quoting from an earlier historian. Nicholson had earlier quoted from Frost's then-unpublished account, and relied upon the documentation that Frost provided him. So in places where Frost quotes Nicholson he is retelling his own story as it was filtered through the historian's account. Frost expresses gratitude for the instances in which the professional historian (Nicholson) accepted his narrative of events verbatim. To an extent I had not previously realized, Nicholson, who had not been there, relied on Frost to make *The Fighting Newfoundlander* a vivid account of the regiment.

Frost did not publish this book; he says it was an account intended for his family rather than the wider community. Years later, Edward Roberts prepared it for a wider audience by editing out some of the material that would only interest Frost's family, and added additional bridging material (italicized to show that it's an editorial insertion) in places to provide context. Roberts relied on secondary sources for this and comments on the value of some of the work by other authors as a guide to the reader.

The result of these multiple vantage points is that *A Blue Puttee at War* is neither purely an eye witness account nor a detached historical judgment. It contains elements of each. While straddling these genres, it is a highly readable

account of a soldier's experience, and it is also an example of varied perspectives that can be adopted by the historian. This book deserves a wide readership among all who want to understand how soldiers reflected on the war.

We have many more memoirs of Newfoundland soldiers than we have histories of Newfoundland's participation in the war. Our view of the war remains in many ways very personal. This book includes a list of names of those killed in action in various engagements, or awarded medals for bravery. Frost helpfully adds short biographies of many of his comrades, even remembering the men who shared his tent in training, and this gives a human face to the regimental numbers and casualty figures that he carefully compiled. But, his methodological rigour aside, and as useful a document as this is, it is not a history of soldiers.

To turn to a broader issue, we are in the middle of a spasm of WWI commemoration, and this makes Frost's timely book an opportunity to think about history and memory. There remains, a century later, an overwhelming attitude of piety toward the memory of the soldiers and the soldiers' memories. People are encouraged to genuflect to the sacrifice of soldiers, not to inquire into understanding soldiers' actual experiences. Frost is remarkable for his modesty, and, as is not unusual among veterans, he does not dwell on his feelings or upon how the lives of his comrades were changed by the war.

There are a couple of places where Frost reveals things that challenge our contemporary fetish for idealized heroes. He can do so with impunity because he was one of them. Readers of *NLS* will remember the controversy a few years ago over a journalist's suggestion that soldiers and airmen were sometimes awarded medals as much to help recruitment as to single out exemplars of heroism. Frost does not question the heroism of Tommy Ricketts; in fact, Frost was the officer who nominated Ricketts for the Victoria Cross. But Frost also tells us that two officers had to witness the act of bravery, a rule that was ignored in this case because the Newfoundland government lobbied for Ricketts. It was concerned that the war would end without a Newfoundlander being awarded a VC.

There is a less political but more poignant moment in the memoir. Frost quoted from a letter he wrote to his uncle in 1920 in which he recounted that the men of the regiment were enraged after witnessing the aftermath of an atrocity committed by German soldiers. The letter finished with the words "No more prisoners were taken that day" [p.377] The implication is that the Newfoundlanders killed those who tried to surrender that day. Twice Frost underlines the suppression of this memory. He tells us that the War Office censored

this line from *The Fighting Newfoundlander* when Nicholson quoted from the letter, and speculated that although a Yarmouth clergyman drew upon the letter for a sermon he likely did not quote that line. It is worth reflecting on the effect the war had on making men into killers and paying attention to those whom they killed — rather than what we now do. We adopt reverence to the Newfoundlanders who sacrificed their bodies for a glorious yet vague cause, and elide their killing.

Edward Roberts, and the Frost family, have done us a great service in bringing us this excellent narrative. It not only adds significantly to a rich literature of soldier memoirs, but it is worth considering as a text that straddles history and memory. It also raises the issue of how little we know our way around the past, even in areas that have been well trodden.

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