

Thunder Bay & the First World War, 1914-1919 by Michel S. Beaulieu, David K. Ratz, Thorold J. Tronrud and Jenna L. Kirker

Patrick M. Dennis, OMM, CD

Volume 111, numéro 2, fall 2019

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065092ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065092ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (imprimé)

2371-4654 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Dennis, P. M. (2019). Compte rendu de [*Thunder Bay & the First World War, 1914-1919* by Michel S. Beaulieu, David K. Ratz, Thorold J. Tronrud and Jenna L. Kirker]. *Ontario History*, 111(2), 231–233. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065092ar>

between bacterial waterways and flow regimes intended to optimize navigation and power production (112). Style and content are mutually reinforcing in *Levelling the Lake*. Benidickson argues that upstream activity affects downstream communities. Similarly, chapters flow together. Given these strengths, Benidickson's text would be suitable for anyone interested in northern resource development and management, Canadian-American relations—or, more generally, borders and boundaries—and, ecosystem health.

From a philosophical standpoint, *Levelling the Lake* encourages readers to reflect on their position within and relationship to watersheds. Our day-to-day actions

and the industries we support shape our neighbours' and our descendants' access to resources. Benidickson's text thus provides us with a framework to better engage with contemporary debates about water (mis) use. His historic analysis can help us to make sense of contemporary problems like microplastic consumption and to imagine its temporal and geographic breadth. In the midst of environmental crisis, Benidickson's book is a must-read for water users.

Brittany Luby, Assistant Professor, University of Guelph

Margaret Lehman, Undergraduate Research Assistant; Manomin Research Project, University of Guelph

Thunder Bay & the First World War, 1914-1919

By Michel S. Beaulieu, David K. Ratz, Thorold J. Tronrud and Jenna L. Kirker

Thunder Bay, Ontario: The Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society Inc., 2018. 232 pages.

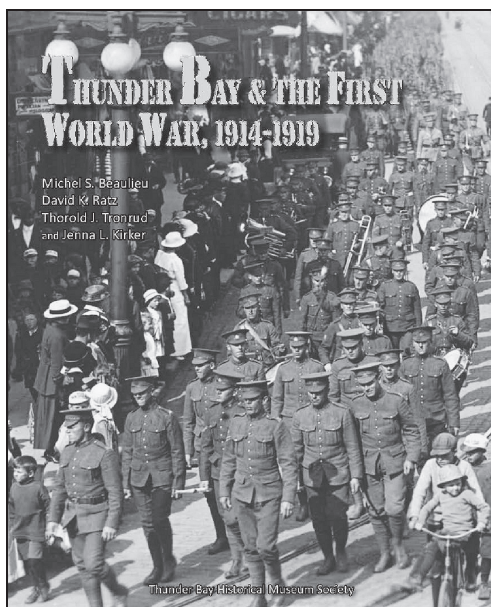
\$20.00 softcover (large format). ISBN 978-0-920119-84-6 (thunderbaymuseum.com)

Published on the 100th anniversary of the end of the Great War, *Thunder Bay* is a lavishly illustrated history of Fort William and Port Arthur at war and a comprehensive overview of the political, military and social events that ultimately shaped the future of these two communities. A timely and worthy addition to the canon of commemorative First World War histories, this volume successfully blends the controversial aspects of the Twin Cities' response to the conflict with many of their citizens' heroic battlefield exploits.

Co-authored by four historians, this scholarly effort is well-researched, having drawn heavily on a wide variety of archival records and an extensive list of secondary sources. One principal strength lies among

countless quotes from contemporary letters and newspaper articles, particularly those often-poignant words written by soldiers in the field. For example, after the Battle of Mount Sorrel (June, 1916), Private Will Davey, a steam fitter from Port Arthur, would write home of men "blown to atoms," then ask his wife to "Kiss the children for me, and tell them to pray for their Daddy out here" (85).

In time, the Lakehead would provide drafts of soldiers to many units in the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF), especially to the 8th Battalion (90th Winnipeg Rifles), then later to the 28th (North West), the 52nd (New Ontario), and the 44th (Manitoba) battalions. Still other volunteers would be sent to the Canadian and British navies and



to the Royal Flying Corps.

But, as we come to learn in *Thunder Bay*, the first battle casualty from the local area was a married man from Fort William—Lance-Corporal Billy Huston, who served, not with a local unit but, with an obscure although soon to be famous regiment—the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry. Huston was shot by a German sniper and died on 25 January 1915 (28).

Readers will also learn that while women were prohibited from combat service, many locals served honourably, both as nurses with the Canadian Army Medical Corps and with the Red Cross as Voluntary Aid Detachment workers. Foremost among these was Nursing Sister (and Acting Matron) Beth Lawrie Smellie of Port Arthur, who served eighteen months in France (1915-1916), was Mentioned in Despatches by Field Marshal Haig, and was later decorated with the very prestigious Royal Red Cross, 1st Class (158-159).

Overall, the seven chapters of *Thunder*

Bay present a factual and chronological account of wartime events that affected the Lakehead, one which seamlessly alternates between the home front and the Western Front. To their great credit, though, the authors do not shy away from controversy, nor do they attempt to offer anything but an unvarnished look at the battles fought and the high price paid for victory. They acknowledge that the manner in which local leaders and ordinary citizens responded to the "Alien Question" quickly became a catalyst for ugly racist attacks, and ultimately left a "black stain on themselves and their cities" (45). Moreover, when the "steady stream of recruits eager to fight" (12) slowed to a trickle and gave way to demands for conscription, like the rest of the country the Twin Cities sustained severe fractures, divisions that would take more than a generation to heal (129, 132-134).

There are two other controversies of note which receive detailed attention in *Thunder Bay*: first, the remarkable contribution to the war effort made by First Nations' men; and second, the myriad impacts of labour unrest precipitated in large part due to manpower shortages. Notably, local Indigenous men had little incentive and no obligation to serve. Yet, over four thousand would enlist in the CEF, more than three hundred would make the ultimate sacrifice, and at least fifty would be decorated for bravery (160).

As for labour unrest, manpower surpluses early in the war gave way to critical shortages, especially on farms. But, as the authors point out, the introduction of large numbers of women into the workplace, combined with demands for higher pay, led to civic turmoil and increasing resentment from those unable to adjust to cultural shifts caused by the war. Eventually, fear of communism and the growing

influence of labour organizations, believed to be led by “enemy aliens,” were seen to be at the heart of this unrest. And so, on 25 September 1918, the federal government “effectively declar[ed that] all groups representing unskilled and immigrant workers at the Lakehead were illegal”—yet another wartime blow to democracy (142-145).

Finally, with respect to overall form, apart from the book’s evident and quite commendable strengths, there are perhaps just two important flaws of note. The Chapter Six summation of “Conscription and the Military Service Act, 1917” declares that despite local success rates, “Nationally... conscription was largely a failure in that it did not secure the large number of recruits that had been hoped for” (122). The source cited is J.L. Granatstein and J.M. Hitsman’s much-dated 1977 study, *Broken Promises*, the conclusions of which the authors also note were reversed by Jack Granatstein in 2001. This oddity begs the question, why would the authors choose to perpetuate the myth that conscription

failed at the national level? Indeed, their assertion is not supported by G.W.L. Nicholson’s official history of the CEF in 1962 and is flatly rejected by more contemporary historiography on the subject. On a technical note, surprisingly *Thunder Bay* suffers a bit from a lack of rigorous editing. Apparently, several spelling errors were not picked up by spell-check, and several other minor errors collectively suggest the manuscript required one more final scrub.

In summary, as the authors note, “The Lakehead at war was, in essence, a distillation of a nation at war” (11). In this respect, *Thunder Bay* is a highly readable, fast-paced account that will appeal both to general audiences and to academics alike, and certainly deserves a spot on the library shelf of all Canadian military historians.

Patrick M. Dennis, OMM, CD
Colonel (Ret’d)
Adjunct Associate
Laurier Centre for Military, Strategic and
Disarmament Studies

Czech Refugees in Cold War Canada

By Jan Raska

Winnipeg, MB: University of Manitoba Press, 2018. 320 pages. \$27.95
paperback. ISBN 9780887558276. (www.uofmpress.ca)

Many years ago, I had the good fortune of volunteering at the Bata Shoe Museum on Bloor Street in downtown Toronto. The museum opened its doors in 1995, the logical expansion of founder Sonja Baťa’s decades long commitment to shoe history, research and production. Née Wettstein in Zurich, Austria, Mrs. Baťa, as we always addressed her, came to Canada in 1946 after marrying

Tomáš Baťa, a Czech industrialist. Mr. Baťa had arrived in Canada almost a decade prior on a special Order-in-Council that enabled him to set up his shoe factory operations in Franktown, Ontario. The company expanded in subsequent years, and also facilitated the migration of hundreds of employees, becoming a quintessential refugee success story, of the rags to riches variety that has become part of the stock