Barbed Wire, Black Flies, 55°F Below: The Story of the Monteith, Ontario POW Camp 1940-1946 by Peter Lanosky

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Cite this review
serves the awards it has already received. It
delivers on a note of some sadness, as Macdon-
ald dies, ending a relationship that spanned
half a century, having “achieved far more
for the country that he created than for the
city which had for so long sustained his po-
itical career.” (190)

David MacKenzie
Ryerson University

Barbed Wire, Black Flies, 55°F Below
The Story of the Monteith, Ontario POW Camp 1940-1946
By Peter Lanosky

Considering that over 30,000 mem-
bers of the German armed forces
began the Second World War in
Europe, but finished it in a network of Ca-
nadian prison camps stretching from New
Brunswick to Alberta, it is curious that so
little historical attention has been paid to
this subject. The POW camps that dotted
the map of northern Ontario are particularly
interesting, as the interned Germans at these
locations became integrated into the local
communities and economies in a manner not
replicated elsewhere. Because professional
historians have largely ignored the Canadian
internment operation, most investigations
have been conducted by amateur research-
ers with personal connections to the regions
in which the camps were located. Such is
the case with Peter Lanosky’s book Barbed
Wire, Black Flies, 55°F Below, which docu-
ments the story of POW Camp Q/23 that
operated from 1940 to 1947 in the northern
Ontario community of Monteith.

Lanosky does an impressive job of clear-
ly explaining the origin and evolution of the
Canadian POW camps, a reflection of the
prodigious amount of archival research that
forms the basis of this book. As the author
notes, the Canadian internment operation in
the Second World War grew out of previous
programs initiated by the RCMP and the
Department of National Defence that aimed
to intern Nazi sympathizers and “enemy al-
iens” already residing within Canada. North-
ern Ontario had previously played host to in-
ternment camps in the First World War and
to “relief” camps during the Depression, and
so by 1940 the region’s geographic isolation
and resource-based economy, when com-
bined with the potential labour pool that
the POWs represented, was seen as a cheap
domestic solution to a complex international
security issue. With the infrastructure from
a defunct correctional facility still in place,
the town of Monteith, about 700 kilometers
north of Toronto, seemed especially suitable
as a POW camp location.

Lanosky also does a competent job of
bringing some historical context to Monteith,
a small community near Timmins that was
formed in the halcyon days of the Clay Belt
discoveries in the early 1900s. The hardship
of a Monteith winter, where the temperature
would sometimes drop to minus fifty Cel-
sius, is compounded in the reader’s mind by
Lanosky’s description of the massive wildfires
that swept through the region in the first half
of the twentieth century. The claim that the
residents of Monteith were a “hardy and re-
silient lot” (p. 8) is if anything an understate-
ment, but the reader’s curiosity about the in-
teractions between the locals and the POWs
is never quite satisfied, especially when con-
sidering the outlying labour projects around
Monteith where these two groups lived and toiled side by side, deep in the northern Ontario wilderness, for months on end. As Lanosky quite correctly notes, the sources that would shed light on this period are hard to come by (or have passed away), but this is exactly what makes research into this story so worthwhile.

The meager historiography that does exist on the Canadian internment operation tends to fixate on prisoner shenanigans and humorous escape attempts, and Lanosky’s book understandably draws attention to several such tales. At various points the reader is presented with German POWs playing hockey, going fishing, or—in the case of Ekhert Brosig—packaging himself in a cardboard box in an attempt to be mailed to freedom. With such a rich tapestry of anecdotes to work with, it is no wonder that researchers rarely give thought to the less-amusing presence of Nazi ideology among the German POWs in Canada. However, Barbed Wire, Black Flies, 55°F Below is a notable exception to this rule, documenting as it does numerous occasions where prisoners proudly demonstrated their allegiance to Hitler and his worldview. While the slapstick nature of many POW stories certainly entertains, it also belies the very palpable contempt with which the captive Germans often regarded their Canadian hosts. As a result, serious physical altercations between guards and prisoners were a regular occurrence at most of the camps in Canada, and Lanosky does a service to the historiography of the Canadian internment operation by drawing attention to the role that Nazi ideology played in fostering this hostility.

Barbed Wire, Black Flies, 55°F Below is less successful when trying to put the Canadian internment operation into a wider context. To be fair, the stated intention of the author was to recover the lost history of the Monteith POW camp, and not to re-write the story of modern Western civilization. Nevertheless, reference to more sources than just William Shirer’s journalistic account of the Third Reich would have prevented the author from making untenable claims about the role of the Treaty of Versailles in the rise of Hitler, or passing along the trope that Ernst Röhm was killed after being “caught in bed with a young boy” (p. 159). No major errors are to be found in Lanosky’s description of the actual internment operation; however the contention that YMCA personnel were only allowed to talk to POW camp leaders is not entirely correct (this situation was remedied early in the war), an important point considering the critical role that this charitable organization played in making life materially and spiritually bearable for prisoners of all ranks. Occasional typos are a bit of an annoyance, especially where they impinge on key facts (i.e. the ship transporting POWs in 1940 was the Arandora Star, and the Canadian guards at Monteith were certainly vigilant, but never vigilante).

Overall, Peter Lanosky has made a very worthwhile contribution to the historiography of the Canadian internment operation, and in the process has helped uncover an important and overlooked history of the largest POW camp in Ontario during the Second World War.

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