

Thunder in the Skies: A Canadian Gunner in the Great War by
Derek Grout

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munity identity, to the defining of British Canadian culture itself.

The book focuses on two cities, Halifax and Quebec, over a limited period, the latter half of the eighteenth century. Part one of the work considers “Print as Sociability.” Eamon’s examination is less on the printers—though there is a full chapter on them—and more on the readers, the British American colonists, and their habits, their traditions, their interests in science and useful knowledge. Part two, “Print and Sociability,” discusses the role of the press in strengthening voluntary associations, in promoting theatre, and in developing coffee houses as gathering places for the elite. In short, thanks to the press—especially newspapers, but also almanacs, handbills, sermons, etc.—the values of the British elite were imprinted on Canadian society. The power of the press was not simply its being employed for political control; it became an effective instrument of social control.

While totally admiring the depth and breadth of this exploration, and essentially endorsing Eamon’s conclusions, I would add two comments:

These Canadian printers were, in a sense, outsiders in their own communities. King’s Printers, despite the title, were independent entrepreneurs, caught between the

requirements of bureaucrats, the desires of advertisers, the expectations of readers, the needs of employees and the demands of creditors. Every week the columns of their papers had to be filled, if not with paid notices and ads, if not with news copied from other papers, if not with submissions of readers, if not with wise and worthy articles, nevertheless filled with words, words culled from somewhere, words penned by someone. These printers were always under pressure. The political, economic, physical and temporal realities of their businesses isolated them, preventing their participation in the sociability their printing was in process of molding. A printer-editor’s life was not a happy one.

The upper middle class sociability that was evolving, thanks to the press, was alien to all the inhabitants of the colonies who were not recent immigrants—to the Native peoples and to the francophones already deeply rooted in the land. The newspaper-reading immigrants were just that, immigrants. Their sociability was a totally British import. In contrast to what already existed in the territory, they were actively engaged in creating a distinct society.

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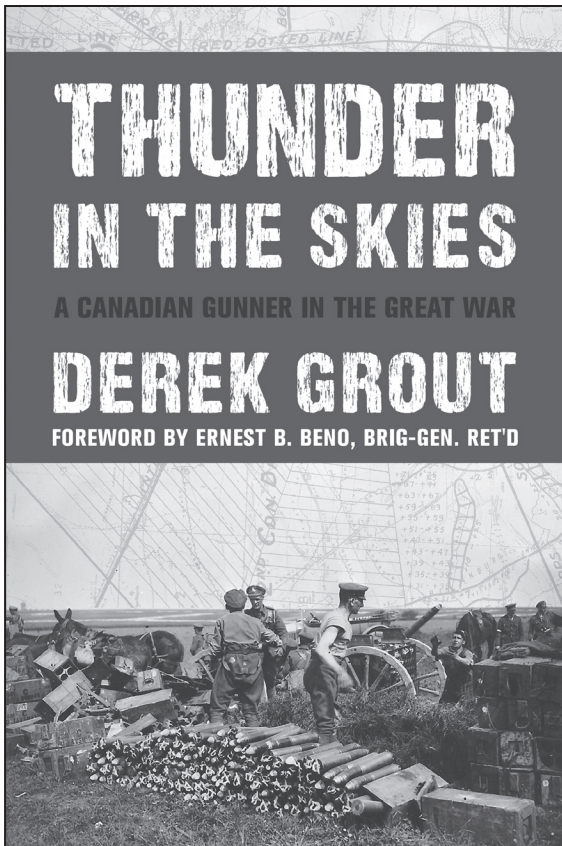
Thunder in the Skies *A Canadian Gunner in the Great War*

by Derek Grout

Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2015. 472 pages. \$24.99 paperback. ISBN 978-1-45973-093-9. 488 pp. \$24.99 digital download (PDF). ISBN 978-1-45973-094-6. 488 pp. \$8.99 digital download (EPUB) ISBN 978-1-45973-095-3. (www.dundurn.com)

It is fortunate for Canadian historians that a rich selection of eyewitness accounts from First World War soldiers has survived the past century, in the form of

memoirs, diaries, letters, and photographs. Each year it seems that a few more collections emerge from the nation’s cupboards and attics, either to be published or donat-



ed to archives and libraries. The letters, diary, and photographs of Albert Eldbridge (Bert) Sargent are valuable additions to this national body of archival material. They form the basis of Derek Grout's exploration of the war through the eyes of artillerymen in *Thunder in the Skies*. As is often the case with historical documents and artifacts, the Bert Sargent papers came to light as a matter of chance. Grout learned of their existence while volunteering at a church book sale in 2004.

Bert Sargent was a 26-year-old engineer living in Montreal when the war broke out. He volunteered for the Canadian Expeditionary Force soon after, finding his way into the 21st Battery, Canadian Field Artillery, as a bombardier. He went over-

seas, was involved in most major Canadian battles from 1916 through the end of the war, was commissioned in the field, and decorated with the Military Cross. Beating the odds, Sargent lived through the war without a scratch.

Rather than transcribe and arrange Sargent's papers for publication as an edited volume, Grout has used them, along with other primary source materials to develop a narrative that follows Sargent and several other soldiers. This approach has many advantages. Grout has added value, for example, by sifting through Sargent's papers and underscoring the most relevant and revealing details. He has also placed Sargent's experience against a much larger canvas that will make the book appealing to general readers who may not otherwise be closely familiar with the First World War. Despite this strength, researchers might have wished to see the letters and diary entries in their original, unabridged form. Another stumbling block for the specialist reader is the fact that the book is wholly uncited. While Grout sometimes makes explicit reference to particular complementary source (a unit war diary for example), the reader is often unsure of what specific source material Grout has drawn upon, and it would be impractical to retrace Grout's steps through the archival material that he has used to flesh out the details in Sargent's war experience.

Notwithstanding these drawbacks, *Thunder in the Skies* is a valuable research source, especially as it is based on the accounts of a man who served as both a non-commissioned officer and an officer outside of the infantry (most extant eyewitness accounts seem to come from infantrymen, who comprised the majority of the fighting divisions). Specifically, Grout's arrangement of Sargent's material sheds light on the technical aspects of field ar-

tillery, as well as the massive and complex infrastructure that supported the gunners' war in France and Belgium. Even a century after the outbreak of war, there is still relatively little in print that deals with logistics (transportation and supply) and related infrastructure in any detail. As a mechanical engineer, Sargent had a particular eye for detail, which enhances the value of his papers for historians and readers who are interested in the nuts and bolts of everyday activities as well as major operations on the Western Front.

Among the revealing passages in Sargent's letters and diaries is one that concerns the distinction between combatant troops (infantry and artillery gun crews for example) and soldiers who served in support trades. Wartime popular culture was mostly oriented toward the combat arms, while those working in support were often targets of derision. Sargent, who hoped to be assigned directly to a field battery, was initially disappointed when he found himself attached to an ammunition column (a transport unit that moved shells up to the guns). He soon learned that ammunition column duty—a part of the unit that he had “never had any use for”—was more

exciting, and more dangerous, than anticipated (128). While the odds of being killed or injured were indeed much higher for the infantry than any other trades, it seems that distinctions between combat and support troops were as much products of popular culture as actual experience.

The very best of Sargent's writing (and Grout's arrangement), however, concerns the everyday material culture of life at war. Readers will find, for example, the gunner's perspective on the differences between serving in a field battery versus a howitzer battery (128). One also begins to appreciate just how much work went in to building new battery positions every time the guns were moved, how camouflage techniques were developed, or what it meant to sleep in steel-roofed Nissen huts with dry concrete floors instead of damp and ill-ventilated dugouts (282-84).

In sum, Grout's volume is the product of considerable effort that enhances the value of an otherwise important addition to Canada's national collection of eyewitness soldier accounts from the First World War.

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Phantoms of the French Fur Trade

Twenty Men Who Worked in the Trade Between 1618 and 1758, vols. I, II, and III

by Timothy J. Kent

Ossineke, MI: Silver Fox Enterprises, 2015. \$120.00 hardcover, 3-volume set, 2,340 pages.
ISBN 978-0-9657230-7-7

Phantoms of the French Fur Trade is an enormous publication, chockablock with incredible detail about the lives of non-Indigenous men, women, and chil-

dren who lived within the networks of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century fur trade. The book is divided into three volumes, each concluding with a different