

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

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serves the awards it has already received. It ends on a note of some sadness, as Macdonald 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 political 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

Lone Butte, British Columbia: Peter Lanosky, with Lanworth Creative, 2011. 192 pages. \$30.00 paperback. ISBN 978-1-77084-079-9 (www.POWcamp23.com)

Considering that over 30,000 members of the German armed forces began the Second World War in Europe, but finished it in a network of Canadian 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 researchers 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 documents 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 clearly 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

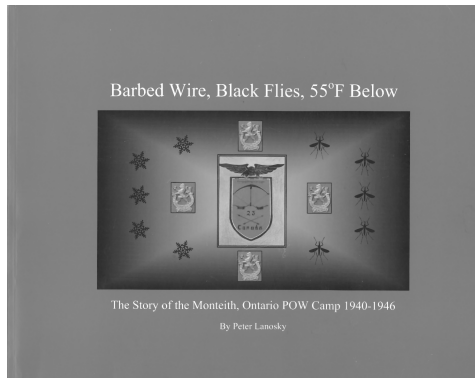
to intern Nazi sympathizers and “enemy aliens” already residing within Canada. Northern Ontario had previously played host to internment camps in the First World War and to “relief” camps during the Depression, and so by 1940 the region’s geographic isolation and resource-based economy, when combined 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 Celsius, 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 resilient lot” (p. 8) is if anything an understatement, but the reader’s curiosity about the interactions between the locals and the POWs is never quite satisfied, especially when considering 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. Never-

theless, 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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