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Robert R. Taylor

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Military Paternalism, Labour and the Rideau Canal Project

By Robert Passfield

Bloomington Indiana: AuthorHouse, 2013. 302 pages.
$21.41 paperback. ISBN 978-1-48175-569-6 (www.authorhouse.com)

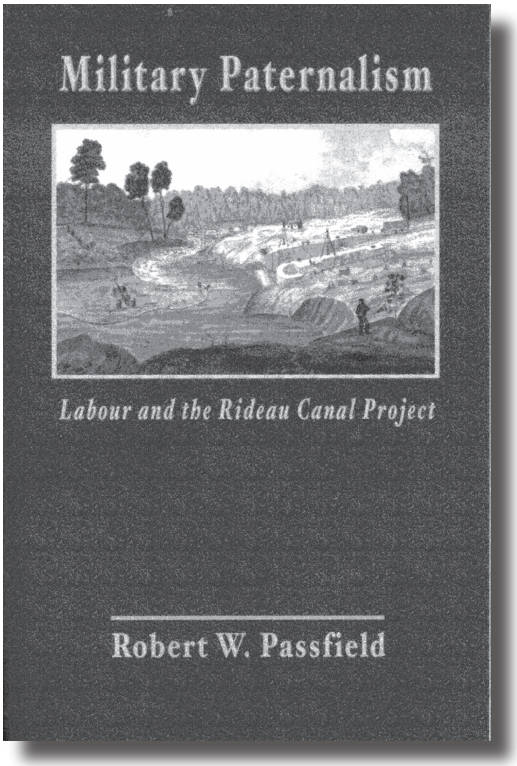
The War of 1812, which we are presently commemorating, left Canadians with a fear of another American invasion. It also left a material legacy in the form of military structures such as Ontario's Fort Henry. But its most imposing monument is the Rideau Canal, built by the Corps of Royal Engineers 1827-31 as a defensible supply route between Montreal and Kingston, avoiding the vulnerable St. Lawrence River. Before it was constructed, however, the British authorities created settlements to the northwest of its planned route to provide labour and supplies for its construction. This project and its political, social and philosophical ramifications are Robert Passfield's subject.

The author is a public historian, retired from Parks Canada. Readers will be familiar with, among several other works, his *Building the Rideau Canal: A Pictorial History* (1982). For his new book, Passfield has worked with the records of the British War Office and the British Military and Naval Record Group at the Library and Archives Canada.

Here he revises a popular view that the British authorities were indifferent to the workers' misery. Anglican Toryism, exemplified by the actions of the Commanding Royal Engineer on the project, Lt. Col. John By, led to measures to alleviate social and economic conditions with the result that class, ethnic and religious conflict on the project never developed. Passfield is particularly critical of the Marxist interpretation that solely economic and selfish class motives prevailed among the Royal Engineers. (The back cover of the paperback edition announces that the book examines military paternalism "within a Marxist context", which is misleading because the author looks at the project from within an Anglican Tory perspective). Moreover, Passfield demolishes the belief that the canal was built mainly by Irish Catholic immigrant workers.

In the book's First Part, he describes how military paternalism operated in the establishment of such townsites as Perth and Richmond. In these settlements, the military authorities offered regular work at adequate wages, provisions at fair prices, medical care, financial support for injured men's families and land on which to live and to cultivate. Passfield's argument is convincing although readers may have trouble following the varied experiences of the Anglo-Irish Catholic, Anglo-Irish Protestant, Ulster Presbyterian Scots-Irish, Gaelic Irish Catholic, and "pauper Irish" immigrants. Because the distinctions are important, however, readers should persist. The author also shows that the misery occasionally suffered by the labourers was more due to their unaccustomed living and working conditions in a forested, swampy milieu with a climate of freezing winters and torrid summers.

Part Two is a short biography of John



By, stressing his Anglican Tory sense of responsibility in a harmonious hierarchical social order. In Part Three, the focus is on the various settlements showing how, influenced by their cultural values, the British officers went beyond their normal duties to aid settlers. Finally, an appendix analyzes the approach of Marxist canal historians to the project and contrasts those attitudes of contemporary Anglican Tories and the emerging Lockean liberals. ("Paternalism", in this context, has none of the negative connotations that it has acquired later and elsewhere.)

Some improvements could be made in a second edition. The book is well illustrated with clearly executed maps, but non-Ontarians need a map showing the townships outside of the Rideau Settlement which Passfield mentions occasionally. The introductory section labeled "Acknowledgements" contains much more than the title suggests but, re-titled, would be a useful précis of the book. The Treaty of Ghent (1814) ended the war of 1812, not, as Passfield says, the Treaty of Utrecht, which actually concluded the War of the Spanish Succession in 1713. A few lines of comparison with the First Welland Canal, built contemporaneously by a private company, might have been instructive. That waterway is mentioned several times in the endnotes but no specific index entry for it exists. As the author discusses the source of malaria (caused by swamp-bred mosquitoes), readers may be confused when he continues to employ the term "miasma" (the allegedly disease-causing noxious air arising in such marshes) as an explanation for the prevalence of the disease. Passfield overuses the phrase, "in sum". In one case, each of three consecutive paragraphs begins with this phrase. I would suggest "to summarize" or "in summary" or some other synonym. He also tends to be textually repetitious in places, as he goes over points that have been well made previously. As this book was self-published, it perhaps did not have the benefit of a rigorous, detached editor.

Setting aside these quibbles, this book is essential reading for North American labour historians. It will also appeal to those who study Canada's canals and colonial Ontario. For those of us who have camped or boated between Ottawa and Kingston, moreover, it provides a fascinating background to the construction of the magnificent "Rideau Waterway".

Robert R. Taylor
Professor Emeritus
Brock University