

Unwanted Warriors: The Rejected Volunteers of the Canadian Expeditionary Force by Nic Clarke

Jordan A. S. Chase

Volume 108, numéro 2, fall 2016

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1050606ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1050606ar>

[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

Chase, J. A. S. (2016). Compte rendu de [*Unwanted Warriors: The Rejected Volunteers of the Canadian Expeditionary Force* by Nic Clarke]. *Ontario History*, 108(2), 275–276. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1050606ar>

Unwanted Warriors

The Rejected Volunteers of the Canadian Expeditionary Force

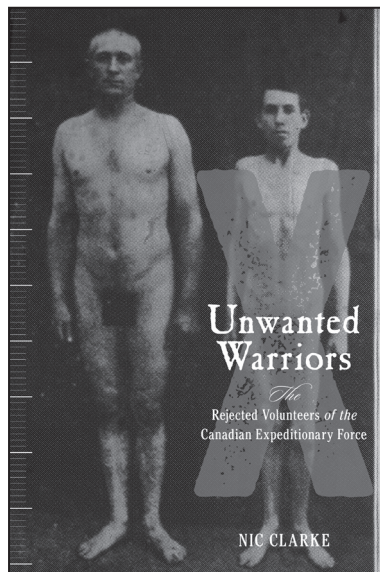
by Nic Clarke

Vancouver, British Columbia: UBC Press, 2015. 239 pages. \$29.95 paperback. ISBN 978-0-7748-2889-5 (ubcpres.ca).

In Nic Clarke's well-researched and well-written *Unwanted Warriors: The Rejected Volunteers of the Canadian Expeditionary Force*, the historian at the Canadian War Museum has provided his readers with an illuminating study pertaining to Canada and the First World War based largely on previously unexamined sources. In this monograph, Clarke interrogates the intersection of the military, society and the individual in the context of recruitment into and rejection from the Canadian Expeditionary Force. Clarke argues convincingly that during the war the concept of military fitness evolved over time, away from a simple binary of fit versus unfit men, toward an increasingly sophisticated classification system designed to deal with heavy casualties and the resultant manpower and morale problems. Acknowledgment of wartime realities and changing societal expectations allowed for this evolution of the military examination system, and yet, as Clarke makes clear, rejection carried with it stigma based on contemporary notions of masculinity, capability, and racial and biological worth. Rejected volunteers, therefore, often faced social pressure and accusations of cowardice

during the war itself, especially when they were not visibly different from accepted volunteers. Clarke argues, moreover, that these rejected volunteers also faced discrimination and disadvantages in the post-war world compared with those who had volunteered for military service but had been accepted. Perhaps Clarke's most novel contribution to the historiography is his expansion of the concept of wartime casualties, and his argument that these rejected volunteers constituted a neglected group of First World War casualties that warrant our sympathy and research.

There is much to praise about this book. Clarke provides his readers with a new way of looking at recruitment, loyalty, duty, casualties, and conscription in Canada between 1914 and 1919. This book fits in well with other Great War studies, including Amy Shaw's *Crisis of Conscience*, Desmond Morton's *Fight or Pay*, James Woods' *Militia Myths*, Sandra Gywn's *Tapstry of War* and Ian Miller's *Our Glory and Our Grief*, which examine topics such as the impact of the war on the home front and the disagreements between the state and the individual over who should serve in the military. Clarke correctly identifies some



deficiencies in the literature and provides areas of further research. Moreover, his use of a wide variety of sources, including film, government and army reports, personal papers, and military memoranda is laudable. Clarke's use of the William Babbie Fonds, the Bruce Report, British army documents and especially the 'Files of the CEF Volunteers Who Were Rejected' is especially important for our understanding of the Canadian experience in the Great War. The inclusion of numerous appendices, figures, and tables was also very helpful in navigating the myriad expectations and guidelines of the military medical examination system and their changes over time.

Of course, this book is not without its shortcomings as well. One issue seems to be Clarke's insistence that historians can humanize and democratize history by using a relatively narrow source base to extrapolate and paint a "broad brush picture" (12). Clarke states that nearly 200,000 men were rejected for military service, but bases much of his project, analysis and argument on the 3,068 personnel files of Canadian men rejected for service, mostly at Valcartier Camp (11). Furthermore, the book appears to contain some inconsistencies that affect comprehension. It is difficult, for instance, to reconcile the argument made in chapter six that rejection was bad for the individual with the evidence presented in the very next paragraph that some aspects of society held these rejected volunteers in high esteem (117). There were also some aspects of Clarke's discussion that could have been more fully developed, such as the issue of masculinity as pertaining to military fitness (44) and the frontier thesis, Canadian exceptionalism, and the colony-to-nation thesis could all have used further discussion.

The book is logically developed for the most part. It begins with the military medical examination process itself, moves to the

impact of the war on physical standards, the implications of rejection for individuals and broader society, and includes a discussion of individuals seeking rejection as a form of resistance to the expectations and pressures of the military and society (150). *Unwanted Warriors* is also clearly written, with accessible prose, effective topic sentences, and concluding sections. Clarke makes use of numerous and clear examples to illustrate his points, including experiences of men and families from Ontario (42, 51, 125) and the use of Ontario sources, such as contemporary newspapers (70) and reports. The argumentation, on the whole, was convincing throughout, although the author clearly struggles with the small sample size as the basis of his evidence and the issues of extrapolation and representativeness. Though Clarke made good use of the variety of source material employed, this reviewer found the supporting evidence sometimes less than convincing. His argument and use of anecdotal evidence regarding suicides is a case in point (117, 153).

Clarke concludes his book by stating that, despite the enthusiasm and willingness of potential applicants, men could be stymied in their attempts at enlistment by societal expectations, an ambiguous examination process, and military understandings of what makes an effective soldier. Indeed, Clarke has made it clear that volunteers, civilians and army doctors could all have radically different understandings of ability and fitness for military service, and these incompatibilities could spell economic, social, educational and even psychological ruin for those volunteers unlucky enough to be rejected for military service during the First World War.

Jordan A.S. Chase
PhD. Candidate
University of Western Ontario