

Old Enough to Fight: Canada's Boy Soldiers in the First World War by Dan Black and John Boileau

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[See table of contents](#)

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armchair historian and academic alike. His writing is accessible and his history sharp. His briskly-paced book would be of particular use to students of Ontario, religion, and the church. For teachers, *In Search of Promised Lands* is an excellent example of archival history done well. It would help to augment discussions on the place of conflict in society, immigration in Ontario, and how modernizing or changing society profoundly impacted religious and cultural groups. Most importantly, Steiner's concluding dis-

cussion about the broad spectrum of Mennonite practices raises important questions about how secularization affected specific religious groups—an area of inquiry not yet fully enough explored in the historical record. For the Mennonites, it has meant a history of debating the preservation of shared values, faith, and rituals and the merits of assimilation into broader society.

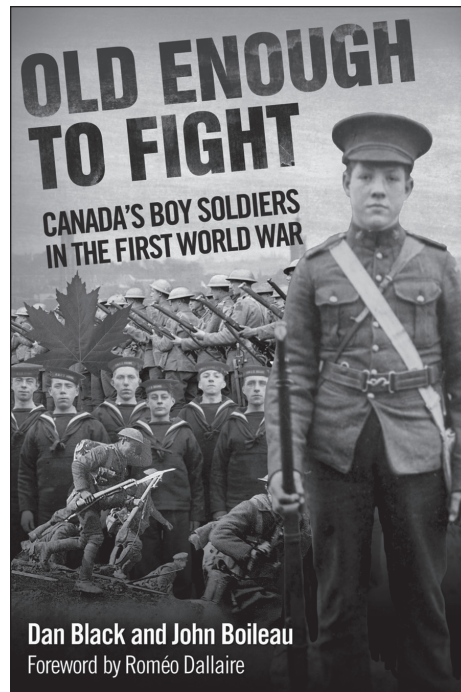
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Old Enough to Fight
Canada's Boy Soldiers in the First World War

By Dan Black and John Boileau

Toronto: James Lorimer, 2013. 448 pages. \$24.95 softcover. ISBN 978-1-4594-0955-2. \$34.95 Hardback 9781459405417. \$16.95 Ebook 9781459405424. (www.lorimer.ca)

With the centennial of the First World War upon us, a large number of books have been published recently about Canadian participation in that conflict. Some cover old ground with fresh insight, while others venture into areas not previously looked at in any detail. *Old Enough to Fight: Canada's Boy Soldiers in the First World War* by Dan Black and John Boileau attempts the latter. Of the roughly 620,000 men and women Canada put into uniform, an estimated 15-20,000 soldiers (or just over 3%) were boys younger than military regulations allowed. The authors note there is a literature on the history of boy soldiers in the Commonwealth, but no detailed examination of the phenomena in Canada. Historians like Desmond Morton in *When Your Number's Up: The Canadian Soldier in the First World War* (1989) and



Tim Cook in *At the Sharp End: Canadians Fighting the Great War, 1914-1916* (2007) have noted the existence of recruits younger than 18 years of age, but this new book is the first detailed treatment of the topic.

The question of how the Canadian Expeditionary Force came to have underage soldiers is answered in the introduction and first chapter. The British and Canadi-

an military tradition included boy soldiers as drummers, buglers and occasionally as ordinary soldiers in the ranks. Many notable figures in Canadian military history started their careers in this way, including James Wolfe, Isaac Brock and Sam Steele. The Militia Act allowed for the enlistment of soldiers as young as 16 years old and sponsored paramilitary training for high school students through cadet corps.

When the time came to mobilize a force for service overseas, the recruits had to be between 18 and 45. If he had parental consent, a soldier younger than 18 could be recruited. The authors note that many boys were turned away, but the laxness of the recruiting system allowed many others to circumvent the regulations. The volunteer only had to declare their age and the medical officer had only to note his “apparent age,” which allowed anyone who looked mature for their age to enlist. At other times recruiters were complicit in the ruse when recruits lied about their age. We only know that thousands evaded the regulations because later some parents petitioned for the return of their children or because the issue had been raised in parliament. However, there was no general outcry over the issue and Canadians seemed more concerned to prevent soldiers obtaining beer in canteens than underage soldiers enlisting. Nonetheless, senior military officials did make some effort to prevent underage boys serving at the front, but given the need for trained soldiers, lower level officers often willfully ignored these efforts.

The first chapter examines why these boy soldiers chose to enlist and suggests their reasons were not that much different than other recruits. There were the typical motives such as patriotism, the thirst for adventure and unemployment. There was also the desire to escape the awful conditions of an orphanage or foster home and also to leave menial and mind-numbing jobs.

What follows in the next eighteen chapters is a series of poignant, moving and detailed accounts of the experiences of these boy soldiers during the war, including a separate chapter on the air and naval components. The book concludes with a chapter on the Memorial Cross, popularly known as the Silver Cross, awarded to mothers who lost sons or daughters during the war. The authors blend these accounts into a wider more traditional narrative of Canada’s part in the war. Drawn from secondary sources, memoirs and archival material, it contains a number of mini-biographies. Adding to this is a number of photographs of the boy soldiers themselves, war art and other photographs of Canadian soldiers and battlefields.

One area where the book falls short is placing the issue of boy soldiers into the social context of childhood in early twentieth century Canada. Clearly childhood meant something different in that era or was at least more mutable than twenty-first-century concepts of it suggest. It was not uncommon for people in their mid-teens to be earning a living and fulfilling adult roles on the farm or as wage earners. We are also left with little in the way of comparative data on the rest of the Canadian military at the time. While the number of underage soldiers was certainly large, as Morton notes (279) the average Canadian soldier was just over 26 years. Without this sort of contextual information we are left wonder what the significance of this phenomena is, because other than their youth, the experience of these soldiers was not remarkably different than their older comrades. Notwithstanding this concern, *Old Enough to Fight* is a well-researched and well-written addition to our knowledge of the Canadian experience of the First World War.

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