

# *Patriotism and Camaraderie*

## *Workingmen in a Peacetime Militia Regiment 1907-1954*

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*The early twentieth-century militia has been ignored or caricatured by most social historians, especially those studying the working class. At first glance, the militia seems like an obviously repressive organization which focused on breaking strikes and crushing the will out of the workingmen in its ranks. Yet workers continued to join the organization, obviously finding some value in it. A Gramscian interpretation of this phenomenon (based on a detailed study of the Oxford Rifles Regiment, from Woodstock, Ontario) sees the militia as a site of subtle struggle, a place where the dominant culture succeeded in reinforcing "common sense" values such as patriotism or imperialism, while the subordinate group found room to express themselves in an atmosphere of camaraderie. Whether the issue was disputing restricted access to sports, or ignoring cultural condemnation of drinking, the peacetime militia provided opportunities for workingmen to forge a masculine fellowship under their own rules.*

*La plupart des spécialistes de l'histoire sociale et notamment ceux qui s'intéressent à la classe ouvrière n'ont porté aucune attention aux milices du début du 20<sup>e</sup> siècle, sauf pour les railler. À première vue, elles semblent être des organisations purement répressives, occupées à briser les grèves autant que la volonté des ouvriers qui se joignaient à elles. Mais comme ces derniers n'hésitaient pas à s'y enrôler, ils devaient donc en tirer un profit. Une interprétation gramscienne de ce phénomène (à partir d'une étude détaillée du Oxford Rifles Regiment de Woodstock en Ontario) fait des milices un champ clos de conflits masqués où les représentants de la classe dominante s'employaient avec succès à renforcer les valeurs « légitimes », telles que le patriotisme ou l'impérialisme, tandis que ceux des classes inférieures pouvaient s'y extérioriser dans une atmosphère de camaraderie. Qu'on y discute des limites à la pratique des sports ou qu'on se moque de la réprobation culturelle de l'alcoolisme, les milices du temps de paix offraient aux ouvriers la possibilité de se forger des associations masculines soumises à leurs propres règles.*

When the "new labour history" first emerged as an exciting field of study in Canada, it had little to say about the nation's militia. Militia units considered as social organizations did not appear in studies of working-class culture,

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perhaps on the assumption that they were middle-class institutions.<sup>1</sup> When the militia was mentioned, it was as an actor in the stories of industrial conflict, invariably described as some sort of impersonal strikebreaking machine — a passive tool of the employers. In his Canadian Historical Association pamphlet, Irving Abella included militiamen with “Goon squads, blacklists, spies [and] strikebreakers” as weapons used by “rapacious industrialists to break unions, strikes and often the heads, arms and legs of those involved in them”. In Bryan D. Palmer’s work, militia units were continually summoned by authorities; they appeared at the scene of the strike or riot, played their role, and then disappeared. In this sort of presentation, the militia units acted as corporate bodies, and not as groups of individuals.<sup>2</sup>

These labour historians drew support from historical investigations of Canada’s peacetime militia, which highlighted the role of citizen soldiers in breaking strikes and busting unions. Jean Pariseau’s detailed examination of 145 cases of armed aid to the civil power since Confederation and his notes on a further 100 cases before 1867 revealed that many of these incidents involved strikes; indeed, from the turn of the present century, “aiding the civil power” became almost synonymous with strikebreaking.<sup>3</sup>

Labour historians did not invent the perception of strikebreaking as the main role of the citizen soldiers; at the time, this idea led some union leaders to warn members against joining the militia.<sup>4</sup> Yet many workers ignored these warnings and signed up for militia service. The presence of workingmen in the militia was embarrassing to early labour historians working within rather superficial Marxist traditions. They tended to overlook the militia, probably uneasy with the thought that anyone forcing the issue would have to rely on notions of “false consciousness” or “social control”. In fact, most members of the military and social elite saw the militia as a way to “improve” workingmen in the ranks.

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1. In fact, one of the few studies on the socio-economic make-up of a militia unit concludes that it was composed solely of middle-class men. P.G. Silverman, “Military Aid to Civil Power in British Columbia: The Labour Strikes at Wellington and Steveston, 1890, 1900”, *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, Vol. 61 (1970), pp. 156-157.

2. I. Abella, *The Canadian Labour Movement, 1902-1960*, CHA Booklet No. 28 (Ottawa: The Canadian Historical Association, 1978), p. 5. For examples of B.D. Palmer’s treatment of the militia, see the following works: *Working Class Experience* (Toronto: Butterworth, 1983), p. 155; “Give Us the Road and We Will Run It”: The Social and Cultural Matrix of an Emerging Labour Movement” in G.S. Kealey and P. Warrian, eds., *Essays in Canadian Working Class History* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), p. 121; *A Culture in Conflict* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1979), pp. 214-215.

3. J. Pariseau, “Forces armées et maintien de l’ordre au Canada, 1867-1967 : un siècle d’aide au pouvoir civil” (Ph.D. dissertation, Université Paul-Valéry III, 1981).

4. Desmond Morton, *Canada and War* (Toronto: Butterworth, 1981), pp. 22-23, 49. Requests for aid to the civil power increased greatly following the turn of the century; most involved labour disputes. See Morton, “Aid to the Civil Power: The Canadian Militia in Support of Social Order, 1867-1914”, *Canadian Historical Review*, Vol. 51 (1970), pp. 422-423. On the other hand, Jean-Yves Gravel estimates that only one-third of the incidents of aid to civil power in the late 19th century involved strikes. See Gravel, *L’armée au Québec. Un portrait social, 1868-1900* (Montreal: Boréal, 1974), p. 114.

Such “improvements” would result from the discipline demanded of the enlisted men and the maintenance of a caste system in the unit, marked by a clear line drawn between commissioned officers and men in the ranks. Both discipline and the caste system carried over to social functions, though less rigidly; the men still paid respect to their superiors and called the officers “sir”.

While these images must have tempted some historians to see the militia as a fine example of social control imposed on workers, such simple theories do not explain why many workers willingly joined the militia when these repressive ideas should have made them reluctant to do so. No one could force a man to join the militia, or prevent him from quitting whenever he wished. Some military leaders who wished to use the militia as a tool for social reform acknowledged the quandary: the militia had to instill social obedience, not in volunteers, but in those not interested in enlisting. For this reason, some military men called for peacetime conscription.<sup>5</sup>

A more subtle approach might argue that the social attractions and camaraderie of militia life served to entice workingmen to join an organization which could then mould them as desired. Yet one must be wary of explaining the behaviour of the soldiers as a result of elite manipulation. Such an explanation denies them any role as active agents in the formation of the militia environment and suggests that they voluntarily subordinated themselves to a regime of systematic repression. It is just as reasonable to argue that workingmen joined the militia because they felt it could satisfy some of their own needs.

In recent years, as historians of subordinate groups in society explored new subjects and new interpretations, the militia seemed to vanish from the scene altogether, leaving its earlier reputation as strikebreaker firmly in place. Yet this impression has resulted in a one-dimensional depiction of Canada's peacetime militia, which emphasizes the unusual rather than the norm. Many units experienced little or no strike duty, and most of the men who passed through the ranks of the militia never took part in such activities.<sup>6</sup> In many

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5. James Eayrs, *In Defence of Canada*, Vol. 1 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964), p. 69.

6. Any argument which makes strikebreaking the prime purpose of militia units must also explain why the only urban areas outside Quebec that consistently lacked militia units were those noted for intense industrial conflict. The lack of units in the towns of Quebec is understandable, considering the decidedly anglophone orientation of the militia, but most English-speaking urban Canadians took a local militia unit for granted. In 1911, 128 towns outside Quebec had populations greater than 4,000 people. Only 12 of these towns — Glace Bay, North Sydney and Sydney Mines in Cape Breton; Fort William, Cobalt and Midland in Northern Ontario; Nanaimo and North Vancouver in British Columbia; Hawkesbury, Arnprior, St. Boniface and Dartmouth — lacked militia units. In these calculations, town size is based on the 1911 census and militia localization on: Canada, Department of Militia, *Quarterly Militia List, 1910* (Ottawa, 1911). Thus only in Cape Breton and British Columbia, where strikes were prolonged and brutal, and in Northern Ontario, where similar conditions would soon lead to intense conflict, did urban places consistently lack militia units.

towns and cities, large numbers of workingmen willingly joined the ranks of local militia regiments. This oversight has left a gap in our understanding of the social and leisure activities of young (and, until recently, male) Canadians.

As social history has become more sophisticated and produced more dynamic models of power and structure in society, it has been possible to redress this omission. The recent revival of interest in Gramscian theory offers one route for understanding the experience of men in Canada's peacetime militia during the first half of the 20th century. Gramsci's work points out how power relations frequently involve the consent of the subordinated, as well as, or instead of, coercion. This consent can be obtained through a myriad of channels, including the definition of "common sense" and the co-option of cultural artifacts arising in a counter-hegemonic discourse. At the same time, the wooing of the subordinated changes the construction of the dominant world view. Most of the struggle to convince or co-opt on the one hand, and to resist or hijack on the other, takes place at the level of popular culture.<sup>7</sup>

The example of an apparently antilabour organization such as the militia staffed with workers throws some illumination on the process of creating and resisting hegemony. A detailed examination of a specific militia regiment — the Oxford Rifles of Woodstock, Ontario — during the first half of the 20th century demonstrates how, in areas without endemic industrial conflict, workingmen may have associated the militia not with strikebreaking, but with "common-sense" values such as patriotism or with a sort of camaraderie that, occasionally, defied cultural definitions of respectable behaviour. These men were aware of the militia's role in breaking strikes, but they were willing to take the slight chance of being involved in such activity. They joined partly because they accepted the dominant ideology of pride in Canada and the Empire, believing that militarism expressed patriotism and that patriotism was important. At the same time, other aspects of militia life exhibited agency on the part of the peacetime warriors. For some attractions, such as organized sports, militia service allowed workingmen a chance to participate in an activity normally restricted to non-manual workers. As well, workingmen took a concrete role in shaping some social aspects of militia life. The

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7. The best introduction to Gramsci's thoughts for historians is T.J. Jackson Lears, "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities", *American Historical Review*, Vol. 90 (1985). See also W.L. Adamson, *Hegemony and Revolution: A Study of Antonio Gramsci's Political and Cultural Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980) and Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. by Q. Hoare and G. Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971). For some recent examples of work in this tradition, see James Epstein, "The Constitutional Idiom: Radical Reasoning, Rhetoric and Action in Early Nineteenth-Century England", *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 23 (1990), pp. 553-574; Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985); Keith Walden, "Speaking Modern: Language, Culture and Hegemony in Grocery Window Displays, 1887-1920", *Canadian Historical Review*, Vol. 70 (1989), pp. 285-310.

sergeants' mess or men from the ranks sponsored many dances, dinners, and parties. The men themselves created the camaraderie of fun and drinking in canteen and mess, and especially at camp. They used the unit as the basis for a male social club, without the dues of a fraternal order.

The Oxford Rifles Regiment came into existence in 1907 as an urban unit based in Woodstock, replacing a moribund rural-based regiment of the same name. In this earlier incarnation, the Oxford Rifles Regiment did have direct experience in the field of strikebreaking. In 1899, a London street car strike escalated into violence and the Oxford Rifles joined several units from nearby towns in sending volunteers to the Forest City. In London, the citizen soldiers protected the trolleys and patrolled the streets for a week, on at least one occasion backed by a Maxim machine gun.<sup>8</sup>

The Oxford Rifles never again participated in strikebreaking, chiefly because of the lack of industrial disputes in Woodstock. Though industry dominated the local economy, it did not grow at the rate that other towns experienced. Between 1891 and 1911, the industrial sectors of many towns in Southern Ontario underwent a process of concentration and consolidation, accompanied by a rapid growth in the size of the labour force. In spite of the fact that Woodstock's industrial base did experience consolidation, it did not witness any expansion in terms of its industrial work force.<sup>9</sup>

An almost perfect silence on the industrial relations front accompanied the sluggish growth of the labour force. Indeed, in 1927, Woodstock authorities repeated a boast they had made in 1906:

Labour conditions in Woodstock are very favourable, for the city has a splendid record of complete freedom from industrial strikes and other labour troubles.<sup>10</sup>

They barely exaggerated; despite the importance of industry to Woodstock's economy, unions did not play a strong role in the workplace until after the Second World War, when the United Auto Workers organized many

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8. *Woodstock Daily Sentinel Review* (July 10-18, 1899) and *London Free Press* (July 10 and 12, 1899). Palmer's "Give Us the Road" is an examination of this strike.

9. While London's industrial work force had increased some 56% between 1901 and 1911, and the towns of Berlin and Brantford, of roughly equal size to Woodstock, saw their labour forces increase by over 100%, Woodstock's labour force only increased by 19% in this period. See Canada, *Fifth Census of Canada, 1911* (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1912) Vol. 3, table 11. In fact, from 1891 to 1940, the industrial work force of Woodstock only grew by 52%. See Woodstock Board of Trade, *Industrial Survey of Woodstock, Ontario* (1944), p. 17.

10. *Woodstock Old Boys and Girls Homecoming Reunion, Official Program and Souvenir Booklet* (Woodstock, 1927), p. 61; see also "Industrial Number", *Woodstock Express* (February, 1906), p. 2. By contrast, see the discussion of strikes in other Southern Ontario cities in Craig Heron and B.D. Palmer, "Through the Prism of the Strike: Industrial Conflict in Southern Ontario, 1901-14", *Canadian Historical Review*, Vol. 58 (1977), pp. 423-458.

of the large factories in Woodstock. From the turn of the century until the start of World War II, Woodstock workers went on strike only four times, once in 1912 and three times in the 1930s. Only two of these strikes lasted for more than a week, one involving about 40 printers and the other about 100 textile workers.<sup>11</sup>

Before postulating reasons for the presence of workers in the ranks of the peacetime militia, proof that such inclusion actually took place must be furnished. Available sources provide good information on the men in the ranks of the Oxford Rifles for two periods in its history. Two roll books and a set of orders from the period 1907 to 1914 contain the names of 775 enlisted men while two roll books for the years 1920 to 1928 include 567 names. Cross-references to city directories provide occupational titles for 296 men in the former period and 353 men in the latter.<sup>12</sup> (The high number of men without occupational titles in the first period reflects the difficulty of making firm links when two of the sources did not provide addresses.) The following table divides these lists of occupational titles into three groups — non-manual workers, skilled manual workers, and unskilled manual workers. The term “workingmen”, as used in this study, applies to the latter two groups.<sup>13</sup>

**Table 1** Occupational Background of Soldiers  
in the Oxford Rifles Regiment

Category	1907-1914	1920-1928
Non-manual	18%	23%
Manual Skilled	39	39
Manual Unskilled	43	38
<i>N</i>	296	353

Source: See note 12.

Table 1 suggests that manual workers filled four out of five places in the ranks of the Oxford Rifles before the Great War while by the 1920s, the ratio had dropped slightly to three out of four. In both periods, skilled and unskilled workers each made up approximately half of the total workingman contingent

11. Strikes are listed in the annual reports of the Ontario Bureau (later Department) of Labour and in the *Labour Gazette*.

12. Woodstock Museum, Oxford Rifles Collection (ORC), *Regimental Order Book* (1907), *Regimental Roll* (1910-1913), *Roll Book* (1907-1909), *Roll List* (1923-1927). Unfortunately, no comprehensive lists of names could be found for the 1930s or the postwar period.

13. These groups are not meant to serve as any sort of proxy for class. While the concept of class is a key debating point in social history, this study takes the view that class is culturally defined and that any individual's class position is a function of self-identification which may be constrained by occupation.

in the unit. In this, the ranks differed from the officer corps where members needed some formal education and personal wealth to obtain a commission and cover mess dues and other expenses. Both before and between the wars, the officer corps had almost no workingmen.<sup>14</sup>

By joining the Oxford Rifles, these workingmen theoretically made themselves available for strike duty. Why were they willing to place themselves in this position? Before turning to an hypothesis based on the notion of cultural hegemony, an explanation founded on much simpler principles must be explored: militia members received pay for their services. Though cash might seem to be a very obvious inducement, in reality, militia pay provided little incentive to join. Militiamen usually received pay for much less than the actual amount of time spent in training. Before the First World War, men in the militia earned pay only for the required 10 days of drill per year, though most units trained much more frequently. Between the wars, the government forced the militia to reduce paid training significantly; in many years, they authorized none at all. Only at the end of the 1930s could the militia hierarchy again provide for 10 or 12 days of paid training in a year. Throughout this period, individuals sacrificed time and money to keep the militia units alive. In Woodstock, the unit trained once or twice a week, most of the year round, clearly exceeding the authorized (and paid) number of days.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, at the best of times, a militiaman might receive 10 days of pay per year; yet even this provided no incentive since the soldier never actually saw this money. In most militia units, particularly in English-speaking urban units, custom demanded that soldiers donate all their pay to the regiment.<sup>16</sup> The men of the Oxford Rifles accepted this custom though, in the 1920s, some of the sergeants felt that their pay should go to the sergeants' mess fund instead. Payments from regimental funds rarely went to individuals; only the bandmaster received a regular salary. Other exceptions included soldiers at

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14. Of the 41 officers known from 1907-1914, 32 have identified occupations. Only 3 individuals fell into the 2 manual groups. Interestingly, these 3 men were all former sergeants, indicating that only by working through the ranks could a workingman become an officer. For these 3 men, militia service provided a route to a recognized respectability. During the whole interwar period, 80 officers served with the unit, 58 of whom could be linked to an occupation, with only 8 in the manual groups. See ORC, *Record of Officers Service*.

15. C.P. Stacey, ed., *Introduction to the Study of Military History for Canadian Students*, 6th ed. (Ottawa: Canadian Forces Headquarters, n.d.), p. 24; G.F.G. Stanley, *Canada's Soldiers*, 3d ed. (Toronto: Macmillan, 1974), p. 343; M.A. Pope, *Soldiers and Politicians* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), p. 86; interviews with Mr. Ed Bennett, Mr. Harold Hayes, Mr. Ben Hook, and Mr. Norman Shrumm, June 1985. All of these men, and the others mentioned in later notes, served with the Oxford Rifles.

16. Pope, *Soldiers and Politicians*, p. 68; F.B. Ware, *The Story of the Seventh Regiment Fusiliers of London, Canada, 1899 to 1914* (London: Hunter Printing Co., 1945), p. 100.

camp who normally drew partial pay from the regiment, and a few men who earned gratuities for certain services.<sup>17</sup>

Despite this lack of economic inducement, most workingmen had two positive reasons for joining the militia — reasons that must have overridden their objections to any antilabour aspects of the organization. They joined because they accepted the prevailing concept of patriotism, linked to both nationalism and imperialism, and because they were attracted by the social side of militia life, some aspects of which they could shape and control.

The growth of jingoistic patriotism at the turn of the century was tied to a change in the dominant social group in English-Canadian society. During the last decades of the 19th century, the Victorian hegemony of respectability started to crumble under attacks by feminists and workers on the one hand, and by business people on the other.<sup>18</sup> In its place appeared the hegemony of efficiency, marked by corporate capitalism, scientific management, social reform, domestic feminism, and imperialism. In this struggle for cultural dominance, some groups turned to the “invention of tradition” with particular reference to the militaristic state. Throughout the English-speaking world, the late 19th century was marked by a widespread popular acceptance of the military in a mythic role, reflected in everything from the massive Jubilee celebrations of 1897 to the uniforms worn by bicycle clubs or auxiliary branches of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows.<sup>19</sup>

Many workingmen thus signed up for militia service because they shared with the officers the patriotic values emphasized in recruiting speeches and campaigns, or felt their blood stir with martial spirit. The precise form of these values changed over time. The unit’s reorganization in 1907 took place at a time when imperialism played an important role, both in the cultural milieu and on the stage of national politics. Problems encountered in the Boer War and the tensions of European arms races raised new concerns over imperial defence responsibilities. Many Canadians thought that they should contribute

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17. F.B. Ware to F.O. Burgess, December 1, 1922, F.O. Burgess papers, Oxford County Archives; Oxford Rifles, *Minutes of Regimental Committee* (1944-1951), Royal Canadian Regiment Museum, Bk. 14-2462-1944, minutes for May 13, 1946; Oxford Rifles, *Minutes of Mess, 1931-40*, pp. 9, 15, 78; Hook interview. See also *First Annual Report of the 22nd Regiment Oxford Rifles, 1907-8*, Louise Hill Collection, University of Western Ontario Regional Collection, Box OX8; Oxford Rifles, *Roll List* (1923-1927).

18. On the “hegemony of respectability”, see C.J. Anstead, “Fraternalism in Victorian Ontario: Secret Societies and Cultural Hegemony” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Western Ontario, 1992) and Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct*.

19. David Cannadine, “The Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual: The British Monarchy and the ‘Invention of Tradition’, c. 1820-1977” and Eric Hobsbawm, “Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe, 1870-1914”, both in Eric Hobsbawm and Terance Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Carl Berger, *The Sense of Power* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970); Robert Page, *The Boer War and Canadian Imperialism*, CHA Booklet No. 44 (Ottawa: The Canadian Historical Association, 1988).



more to the Empire's needs; pride in a British heritage and support for the British Empire reached its peak in this period. In this heady atmosphere, the militia and paramilitary groups such as rifle clubs and cadet corps found great public support.<sup>20</sup>

These imperialist ideals should have appealed to men from Woodstock, a town that always maintained strong ties to Britain after its founding by a clique of half-pay officers and emigrant English elite. This cannot be directly proven in the absence of personal recollections from the prewar period. However, an indirect proof is possible if it is accepted that imperialist ideals appealed even more to recent immigrants from Britain. Although those born in Britain made up only 20 percent of Woodstock's prewar population, they accounted for some 60 percent of the militia ranks. In the interwar period, the proportion of British-born men in the Oxford Rifles declined to 41 percent, but still exceeded their percentage of the population for the city as a whole.<sup>21</sup> These Britons found their sentiments reinforced in a militia completely patterned after the example of the British Army. From the equipment and uniforms worn by the common soldier through to the names of regiments and organization of divisions, the Canadian militia explicitly reflected British models.

Patriotism could also appear in a more autonomist flavour. Even before World War I, many thinkers felt that military strength could give Canada the right to be treated as a nation. Mistakes made in the Boer War added a reluctance to place absolute faith in British commanders. Following the national experience of the First World War, patriotism led many men to join the Oxford Rifles. They later recalled how they wanted to "do their bit" for their country, following the example of brothers or fathers who had served in the war.<sup>22</sup>

A variety of militia activities reinforced this hegemonic patriotism. Men could participate in parades in the Rifles' distinctive ceremonial uniforms of dark green, which stood out from the scarlet of ordinary infantry units. Parades on Victoria Day or Armistice Day, with thousands of spectators lining the route, explicitly acknowledged these patriotic values. Other ceremonial activities included annual inspections and church parades, the most stirring of which were the outdoor drumhead services held in city parks. Even funerals, such as that of Colonel Woodroffe in 1934, reaffirmed patriotic values. Woodroffe's body lay in state at the armouries, surrounded by a guard of

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20. W. Beahen, "Filling Out the Skeleton: Paramilitary Support Groups 1904-1914", *Canadian Defence Quarterly*, Vol. 13 (1984), pp. 34-39.

21. Oxford Rifles' *Regimental Roll* (1910-1913) lists 301 men, giving birthplaces for 258; 163 of these 258 — roughly 63% — were born in Britain. Another roll book covering the period 1920-1922 contains 247 names. Birthplace is known for 159 of these men. Sixty-five of these 159 — roughly 41% — were born in Britain. See Oxford Rifles, *Regimental Service Roll* (1907-1922).

22. Interview with Mr. Ernest Bond, June 1985. B. Hook, E. Bond, and J. Cole all mentioned this.

honour. Later, the procession featured a flag-draped coffin pulled on a gleaming gun carriage while immaculate troops moved in a slow-march to the sound of the muffled drums draped in black. At the graveside, the “last post” rang out in the cold November air.<sup>23</sup>

Some men took part in excursions to patriotic celebrations; for example, in 1908, a company attended Quebec’s tercentenary celebrations. This trip took a week and included rides around the historic town, a night of pageants, and a royal review by the Prince of Wales. An infantryman from another Ontario militia regiment described the review:

It was a stirring sight, as with the sounding of the advance, the sailor boys swung along. [...] Then came the Cavalry, the sun’s rays glistening on their sabres and scabbards of steel; the Artillery followed, the plains trembling under the rumble of hundreds of heavy horsedrawn guns. [...] Soon we too were approaching the Reviewing Stand, the thrills running up and down our spines...<sup>24</sup>

The patriotic high point for a later generation of militiamen arrived in June 1939. On their first royal tour of Canada, the King and Queen stopped at Woodstock for 10 minutes. The Oxford Rifles paraded to the train station, where they formed a guard of honour and saw their Commanding Officer presented to their majesties.<sup>25</sup> These, and many other ceremonial occasions, reinforced taken-for-granted values and ideologies that lay behind some men’s decisions to join up.

Of course, there were other values at work. The militia appealed to those with a “martial spirit”. Men attracted by the military mystique would jump at the chance to fire a rifle or, in later days, even an anti-tank gun. Carl Berger has shown how an imperialist and nationalist mindset might also reflect a militarist view, which saw a martial spirit as synonymous with manhood and war as “a rather exhilarating kind of sport in which few were killed”.<sup>26</sup> Manoeuvres and war games, as well as the ceremonial functions already described, would bolster these militarist feelings.

The spirits of patriotism and militarism ebbed and flowed. After the First World War, noisy imperialism faded from the dominant world view; instead, an antimilitarist spirit spread through much of the Canadian society and helped elect a Liberal government under a Prime Minister known for his aversion to the military. Then, in the middle of the 1930s, the deteriorating international situation created an atmosphere in which nationalism and imperialism again flourished. The start of the Second World War furnished another indirect proof

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23. O.T.G. Martin, *Oxford’s Big Black Wall* (Woodstock, typescript, 1936), p. 51; Shrumm, Hook, and Hayes interviews.

24. *Sentinel Review* (July, 1908); Ware, *Seventh Regiment Fusiliers*, p. 94.

25. *Sentinel Review* (special edition, June 6, 1939), p. 14; *Sentinel Review* (June 7, 1939).

26. Berger, *The Sense of Power*, p. 235.

that many members of the Oxford Rifles shared the ideologies of patriotism and martial ardour; when the first mobilization plans failed to include the regiment, many men grew impatient and transferred to other regiments or other services.<sup>27</sup>

While the overrepresentation of British immigrants, the reminiscences of men who wanted to “do their bit”, and the many transfers at the beginning of World War II all suggest that certain values attracted men to the Oxford Rifles, other influences were also at work. If nationalism, imperialism, and martial ardour sufficed to attract men, the unit would have relied on constant jingoistic recruiting campaigns. However, after the unit reorganized in 1907, it did not run recruitment drives (except during wartime). Instead, the myriad social activities of the regiment provided another sort of inducement to enlist. In this arena, militia soldiers were able to mould the conditions of their enlistment. Rather than simply accepting definitions of appropriate behaviour from above, militiamen saw their service as an opportunity to engage in a form of oppositional discourse. Whether it was disputing restricted middle-class access to sports, or ignoring cultural condemnation of drinking, the peacetime militia provided opportunities for workingmen to forge a camaraderie under their own rules.

It has long been noted that the militia offered obvious social attractions for its officers. From the first founding of the British North American colonies, a militia commission guaranteed a certain amount of social prestige. In Woodstock, the annual military ball governed the social season while the officers’ mess, which included town notables as honorary members, offered “the promotion of physical and mental culture among, and the providing of rational amusements for the members”.<sup>28</sup> Through sports, dinners, dances, and other social activities, the militia offered workingmen a similar chance to promote their own version of “physical and mental culture”.

To accommodate weekly sports, the armoury housed a large gym, a bowling alley, and other sporting facilities. Militia teams often played in city sports contests. In good weather, outdoor sports included football, rugby, and baseball, while indoor and winter sports included volleyball, basketball, shooting competitions, badminton, boxing, floor hockey, and bowling. Camps usually provided the men with an opportunity to swim in one of the Great Lakes, a welcome diversion since Woodstock possessed no municipal swimming pools. In the postwar period, the unit took part in brigade sports’ nights three times a year. The brigade’s three units took turns hosting the other

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27. Hook interview; Oxford Rifles, *Historical Records*, Book LAB 95, not paginated.

28. Bennett, Bond, and Hook interviews; interview with Mr. Jack Cole, June 1985; Oxford Rifles, *Constitution of the Oxford Rifles Officers’ Mess* (Woodstock: *The Oxford Rifles Regiment*, 1907).

two for a night of sports, with the overall victor after the three meetings winning a cup.<sup>29</sup>

This activity reflected a changing structure for sports in society at large. By the end of the 19th century, the urban working classes found the time and money to participate in amateur sport or to attend the increasingly popular professional sporting events.<sup>30</sup> Militia leaders believed in the amateur ideal — the middle-class notion of positive character building through individual participation in amateur sport. The men of the unit thus had no choice but to participate. Yet this was not necessarily a drawback to militia enlistment; workingmen who could not normally afford to participate in amateur sports could, in the militia, enjoy a number of them at little cost to themselves. Sports in the militia offered something for both groups: it allowed workingmen to take part while allowing the middle class to determine the nature of some sports activities for the working class. The officers acknowledged the value of sports in attracting men. When the unit reorganized following the Great War, regular training did not get underway until the fall of 1920; sports, however, had started some six months earlier.<sup>31</sup>

The form sports took may have been more or less imposed from above, but sporting activity also represented one way in which the militia offered workingmen a chance to interact, make friends, and create an atmosphere of fellowship. The peacetime Oxford Rifles functioned as a sort of social club — a club with two distinct spheres: one for the officers and one for the men. The military aspects served to keep the club somewhat exclusive and provided shared experience and ties; veterans of the wars often sought a return to the fellowship of the uniform.<sup>32</sup> The Oxford Rifles was a club for the patriotic, and a club exclusively for men, providing individuals with a strong sense of male comradeship. Sometimes, the men would participate in this fellowship merely by going down to the armoury on a non-training night and working on their equipment.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, in many ways, the militia acted as a type of fraternal order. The coming of the Depression helped the unit in this respect; men who could not afford the fees of fraternal societies and lodges could find the same sort of male camaraderie in the Rifles.<sup>34</sup> Soldiers from all socio-economic ranks

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29. A.M. Fordyce, *The Oxford Rifles* (Woodstock: *Sentinel Review*, 1926), p. 4; Martin, *Oxford's Big Black Wall*, p. 43; Shrumm, Hook, and Bennett interviews; interview with Mr. Les Cook, June 1985; Oxford Rifles, *Historical Records*.

30. A. Metcalfe, *Canada Learns to Play* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1987), pp. 159-180.

31. Martin, *Oxford's Big Black Wall*, p. 48.

32. Cook interview. During the Depression, officers of the unit experimented with a "veterans' company"; see Martin, *Oxford's Big Black Wall*, p. 50.

33. Bond interview.

34. Hook interview.

shared certain characteristics of age and marital status which made the bonds tighter; throughout the years, young, single men dominated the ranks.<sup>35</sup>

This camaraderie reached its highest pitch at the annual summer camp. When the unit became a city regiment, it gave up the summer camps attended only by rural units. However, in 1912, the Militia Department ordered all urban units to undergo a week's training in camps, angering many Woodstock employers who objected to losing workers in the busy summer weeks. Fiscal restraint led to reduced camp training between the wars. Some years, in the 1920s, saw no camps at all; and until 1935, camps took place on weekends rather than lasting one or two weeks as they did in later years. Even when longer camps reappeared, weekend camps remained, since many members of the unit could not arrange a week or two away from work and family.<sup>36</sup>

Summer camps involved a lot of hard work; the men in the ranks had to pitch tents, dig latrines, and stand guard duty. Training at camp included field training, weapons firing, drill, and inevitably, route marches. Besides work and training, however, camps presented the men with many opportunities for recreation. The officers ran some daytime sports at camp and the men had most evenings free, allowing them to engage in unsupervised leisure activities, often including drinking, either at the camp canteens and messes or at a nearby tavern. The next morning, hungover soldiers would hurry to recover discarded equipment or band instruments, though on one occasion, the Colonel accidentally trod on and mangled a trombone someone had overlooked.<sup>37</sup> For many men, camp brought a new experience to their lives, one shared with other men whom they had come to know well at the armouries. As many men as possible tried to get time off work to attend.<sup>38</sup>

Field manoeuvres took place at camp and at other times in the year, often involving neighbouring units. The account of one set of manoeuvres from 1912 illustrates how they might have had a "rough and tumble" sort of attraction. The reporter described the men climbing over fences and tramping through muddy fields. He recorded one "amusing incident" in which officers had to break up hand-to-hand combat that threatened to get too realistic. According to the reporter, the enthusiastic citizen soldiers did well: ...though perhaps they got a little excited and did not take quite enough cover, ...their forward rushes were executed remarkably well.<sup>39</sup>

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35. In the period before the First World War, three-quarters of the men were under 26, and only 5% were 36 or older; Oxford Rifles, *Roll Book* (1907-1922). The 1907-1909 *Roll Book* contains entries for 93 enlisted men. Only 2 of these entries do not give marital status. For the other 91, 80 are given as single while only 11 are married. The *Roll List* from 1923 to 1927 includes 340 names; of these men, 249 are single and 67 married.

36. Ware, *Seventh Regiment Fusiliers*, p. 139; Martin, *Oxford's Big Black Wall*, p. 52; Hook interview.

37. Hook, Hayes, Cook, and Bennett interviews.

38. Hook, Cole, and Shrumm interviews.

39. *Sentinel Review* (October 29, 1912).

A host of social activities provided chances to build on the foundation of fellowship laid during training. The unit held mess dinners for the sergeants, dinners for the officers, and dinners for the whole regiment. Parties, social evenings, and stags provided changes of pace, as did visits to and parties with other units in the brigade. In 1948, a regimental reunion included a night of entertainment that featured “plenty of comedy, good music and girls”.<sup>40</sup> Every year, the unit held a special children’s Christmas party, complete with the officers and senior NCOs of the unit cheerfully serving dinner.

The officers of the unit arranged most of the events involving the whole regiment, but the men themselves ran a few such activities. Men from the ranks ran most of the smaller events that only involved one company (of the regiment’s four) or members of a single mess. Though these activities — retirement dinners for well-liked sergeants, company stag parties, darts matches with the local Legion branch, and many others — lacked some of the sophistication of the events run by officers, they occurred much more frequently.<sup>41</sup>

Dances, the most common of the unit’s social events, took place throughout the year and ranged from the soldiers’ square dances to the officers’ formal balls. The officers ran some dances, but the sergeants’ mess, the men of each company, and the two bands each took their turns at making the arrangements, though the poor organization of company dances in 1936 led the officers to demand final approval of arrangements.<sup>42</sup> Some of these dances admitted only officers, or sergeants, or men of a certain company (as well as their female companions), while others involved the entire unit.

On a day to day level, the canteen and messes always provided opportunities for passing a relaxed social evening or a comfortable way to finish off a night of drill and training. The canteen and messes, prime attractions of the militia, sold alcohol at very low prices, sometimes even when regular saloons would have to be closed. Despite regulations ordering militia units to obey local liquor laws, the rules could stretch for members, though the inclusion of non-members during the restricted hours now and then led to trouble.<sup>43</sup>

The Oxford Rifles had a sergeants’ mess, a corporals’ mess, and a canteen for the men, as well as the prestigious officers’ mess. The canteen, which only sold beer, was informal and popular. Men would drop by throughout the week for a glass of beer and a hand of cards. Younger soldiers

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40. O.W. Fonger to W.S. Smith, March 31, 1948, Frank Tunaley Collection, Woodstock Public Library.

41. Oxford Rifles, *Historical Records*; interview with Mr. Tom Brooks, June 1985; *Sentinel Review* (September 20, 1912); Bond and Cook interviews.

42. Oxford Rifles, *Minutes '31-'40*, January 2, 1936.

43. Cole and Cook interviews; Oxford Rifles, *Minutes '31-'40*, October 3, 1935; Oxford Rifles, *Minutes of Regimental Committee*, March 1945.

would sit entranced as veterans of the Boer War or Great War told and retold tales of their experiences.<sup>44</sup>

Messes, on the other hand, sold liquor. On most nights, the messes provided opportunities for men to pass an evening, sometimes singing, other times just “shooting the breeze”. Mess dinners, however, could reach the pinnacle of formality. According to a more recent Canadian forces manual, such occasions “allow for camaraderie in a setting governed by formal rules of conduct”.<sup>45</sup> Each mess of the regiment had particular regulations governing traditions such as toasting. For instance, in the sergeants’ mess, the toast to the monarch, proposed by the most junior member of the mess, always came first. Regulations governed conversation too, forbidding women, politics, or religion as topics of conversation in the unit’s messes.<sup>46</sup> These messes were not run by officers, but by committees of members from the ranks. Each mess was sacrosanct; officers could only enter the sergeants’ or corporals’ mess if invited.

The regimental brass band, like the various messes, provides a strong example of workers influencing the environment of the militia unit. The band underwent little military training. The officers only had a nominal connection; sergeants ran the band on an autonomous basis. The band gave experienced musicians a chance to play while others could learn an instrument. All members enjoyed a number of special activities including, for a while, an annual corn roast. The bandsmen wore a special uniform for much of the period and went on separate trips, usually to tattoos or to play at Camp Ipperwash for the cadets. The band, with a strong core of long-term members and its own camaraderie, acted as a sort of private club within the larger unit.

The bugle band, by contrast, did not give members any control at all. The bugle band largely involved underage “boy soldiers” who could not attend the many functions that included liquor. No one bothered to provide special activities for them. The boy soldiers also had trouble in the training schemes. At camp, in the 1930s, the buglers learned to fire the Lewis machine gun. When it came time for manoeuvres, however, the young bandsmen had to be accompanied by a burly sergeant who would stand ready to act as a beast of burden whenever the machine gun section received orders to move.<sup>47</sup>

The bands also provided Woodstock’s workers with a way to appear before the public eye in a “respectable” guise. For years the brass band played concerts every Sunday in a city park, thus advertising this part of working-class culture. In fact, any member of the unit could find similar chances to stand out from non-members. Marching in formation down the city streets on

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44. Bond interview.

45. E.C. Russell, *Customs and Traditions of the Canadian Armed Forces* (Ottawa: Ministry of Supply and Services, 1980), p. 19; Cook interview.

46. Cook interview.

47. Hayes, Bond, and Brooks interviews.

holidays and then, having been dismissed, wandering around in full ceremonial dress gave the men in the ranks a chance to present themselves for public approval. No doubt, some of the young men in the Rifles hoped this would attract female notice, and perhaps result in a date for the next company dance.

Woodstock's experience suggests that the militia, a common institution in English-speaking villages, towns, and cities, attracted and involved a large proportion of the young men in many of those places. The soldiers in the ranks of the Oxford Rifles came primarily from the city of Woodstock. The two sources that include information on residence show Woodstock addresses for 98 percent of the men in the ranks from 1907 to 1908 and 91 percent of the men enrolled between 1920 and 1922.<sup>48</sup> The available regimental records for the period 1907 to 1914 contain the names of 775 enlisted men, representing about one-sixth of the city's male population, according to the 1911 census. Since three-quarters of these men were under 25, they represented a majority of Woodstock's men in this age group. In the immediate postwar records, a total of roughly 600 names appear. These names represent men who joined between 1920 and 1928, two-thirds of whom had not reached their 26th birthday. The population of Woodstock had not increased greatly by 1921; then, just under 650 men in Woodstock were between 15 and 24, and so a majority of them must have joined the unit at some time.<sup>49</sup> Of course, not all of the men served in the unit. For instance, in 1907, the unit numbered 215 enlisted men and 18 officers.<sup>50</sup> Not all recruits became long-serving militiamen; there was a great degree of turnover in the ranks. Entries in a roll book kept from 1910 to early 1913 reveal that exactly one-third of the men who enlisted in 1910 were struck off within a year; a quarter of them quit before their second anniversary while another quarter were still enrolled in 1913 when the book ended. After the war, a similar pattern continued.<sup>51</sup>

In Woodstock, most of these men were workingmen, but this did not make the militia a working-class institution. Workers had not created it, and the membership included a significant number of men from other socio-economic groups. Instead, the militia regiment allowed all groups to rub shoulders in an environment shaped in part by workers. On at least one subject, men in the ranks were able to have their way despite the view of the hegemonic culture. Militia officers constantly complained about the amount of drinking in local headquarters and especially at summer camp. Yet their hierarchy never managed to impose the restrictions they wanted. Although they could restrict camp canteens to beer, attempts to ban alcohol altogether simply led to soldiers smuggling drinks into camp. Such bans failed in the 1880s, in the

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48. Oxford Rifles, *Roll Book* (1907-1909); *Regimental Service Roll* (1907-1922).

49. Canada, *Census 1911*, Vol. 1, p. 85; Canada, *Sixth Census of Canada, 1921* (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1922), Vol. 2, p. 70.

50. Oxford Rifles, *First Annual Report*.

51. Oxford Rifles, *Roll Book* (1910-1913); Brooks and Bennett interviews.



1890s, and again shortly before the First World War. This long-lasting resiliency of a common soldier's traditional right in the face of elite opposition supports the contention that workers and others in the ranks of the militia could regulate some of the conditions of their service.<sup>52</sup>

So long as the Oxford Rifles could appeal to a shared cultural ideology and provide otherwise unavailable social attractions, workingmen enlisted. The collapse of the unit in the 1950s occurred when it could no longer meet these two conditions.<sup>53</sup> Though the militia continued to attract those committed to the Cold War ideology or those influenced by martial interest, these values were much less pervasive than imperialism and nationalism had been in an earlier era. The unit did continue to offer social attractions, but they now met stiffer competition from various sources. Workingmen turned to the YMCA or other social clubs to satisfy their need for sports and relaxing fellowship. Postwar prosperity allowed for more choice in matters of leisure time; less structured organizations and activities could now be pursued. The wide availability of automobiles brought the bright lights of London and even Toronto much closer.

At the same time, the militia became less of a relaxing social club. With the invasion or bombing of Canada a perceived possibility, the military aspects of the militia came to the fore with a new concern for civil defence; camps became serious affairs, devoid of much of their earlier camaraderie.<sup>54</sup> New Canadian military priorities, which emphasized the role of regular soldiers and reduced training and support for the militia along with available money for social extras, hastened the unit's decline.

Ironically, as the ostensible reason for the existence of the Oxford Rifles became stronger, the unit lost its attractiveness to workers. Just as the militia's association with strikebreaking did not prevent workers from joining, its disassociation from such practices could not halt this decline.<sup>55</sup> With nothing to offer to anyone beyond those most ideologically committed, the Oxford Rifles Regiment declined in strength until it had to disband.

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52. Gravel, *L'armée au Québec*, p. 85; William Beahen, "A Citizens' Army: The Growth and Development of the Canadian Militia, 1904 to 1914" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Ottawa, 1979), pp. 217-218; Anthony Kellet, "Messes and Canteens in Canada from Their Origins to 1914", *Military Collector and Historian*, Vol. 31 (1979), p. 109.

53. In the postwar period, the unit's strength never really reached significant numbers. A total of 470 men were members of the Oxford Rifles over the 5-year period from 1948 to 1953. By this time, Woodstock had grown considerably, so these 470 individuals represented a much smaller percentage of the eligible men in the city. Oxford Rifles, *Historical Records*; Canada, *Census 1951* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1951), Vol. 1, 9.25.

54. Cook interview.

55. Politicians had always preferred to use regular soldiers, rather than the militia, to break strikes. After World War I, the regular force was large enough to handle all requests for strike duty. The last such call came in 1933; see D. Morton, "Aid to the Civil Power: The Stratford Strike of 1933" in I. Abella, ed., *On Strike* (Toronto: James Lewis and Samuel, 1974), pp. 79-88.