

*Not Visibly Different: The Rejected Volunteers of the First Contingent, Canadian Expeditionary Force* – NICK CLARK

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In April 1916 Robert Hazelton of Todmorden, Canada caused uproar when he stated that the vast majority of men rejected for service in Toronto were “degenerate, defective...diseased, depraved, deformed...[and]...illiterate...immigrant swine” whose parentage consisted of foreign sailors and “dock prostitutes”.<sup>1</sup> Although the 62-year-old was later dragged from his house and beaten by an irate mob for his comments, Hazelton was expressing a belief held by more than a few Canadians regarding the character of men rejected for service.<sup>2</sup> Nor was this belief simply articulated to Canada. Social commentators in Great Britain and the United States also expressed similar ideas. Indeed, men rejected for military service became a central foundation for many eugenicists and social reformers’ demands for changes to government social and health policies.<sup>3</sup>

Given their impact on their societies it is of interest few historians have actually examined rejected volunteers as a group. Great War historians have primarily engaged with the question of disability by focusing on men maimed, mentally or physically, as a result of combat and societal reactions to these individuals, rather than those disabled by the medical examiner declaring them “unfit”.<sup>4</sup> When historians have examined the

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<sup>1</sup> *Debates of the Senate of Canada, 1916* (Ottawa: King’s Printer, 1916), p.318-320; 337.

<sup>2</sup> “Crowd Mobs Hazelton for Choquette Letter”, *Toronto Globe*, April 17, 1916, p.8; *Debates of the Senate of Canada, 1916*, p.338 Angus McLaren, *Our Own Master Race: Eugenics in Canada, 1885-1945*, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1990), p. 58-62; Paul Maroney, “‘The Great Adventure’: The Context and Ideology of Recruiting in Ontario, 1914-1917,” *Canadian Historical Review*, Vol. 77, No. 1, 1996, p.79, 81.

<sup>3</sup> Edwin Black, *War Against the Weak: Eugenics And America’s Campaign To Create A Master Race* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2003), pp.80-85; Jay Winter, “Military Fitness and Civilian Health in Britain During the First World War”, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 15, No.2, 1980, pp.211-244;

<sup>4</sup> Deborah Cohen, *The War Come Home: Disabled Veterans in Britain and Germany, 1914-1939*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Nicoletta Gullace, “*The Blood of Our Sons*”: *Men, Women, and the Renegotiation of British Citizenship during the Great War*, (New York: Palgrave, 2002); Desmond Morton and Glenn Wright, *Winning the Second Battle: Canadian Veterans and the Return to Civilian Life, 1915-1930*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987); Robert Weldon Whalen, *Bitter Wounds: German Victims of the Great War, 1914-1939*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984); Heather Perry, “Recycling the Disabled: Army, Medicine and Society in World War I Germany”, Unpublished

issue of the “unfit” recruits they have generally done so through the lens of Great War recruiting practices and the manpower shortages of the latter stages of the war, seldom stopping to consider these men’s experiences either singly or a group.<sup>5</sup> Much the same can be said in relation to historians of disability. When examining the relationship between warfare and disability, disability researchers have primarily focussed their attention on the role disabled veterans played in changing public perceptions of disability and growth of the disability rights movement.<sup>6</sup> Those researchers who have investigated army medical examinations during the Great War have done so primarily in relation to the eugenics movement.<sup>7</sup>

With the above in mind this paper aims to contribute to an understanding of rejected men by sketching a general picture of men turned away as unfit to serve by the Canadian authorities in 1914. Using a database constructed from the enlistment records of over 3000 men rejected for service at Canada’s Valcartier Mobilisation Camp between August and September 1914 as its foundation, it reveals that far from being the dysgenic horrors many would later paint them to be; most rejected men were virtually indistinguishable from their accepted colleagues. Generally speaking, these individuals were of the same height, age, physical build and social backgrounds as those who boarded the troopships for England in October 1914. In the majority of cases rejected men’s disqualifying impairments were either invisible or incomprehensible to the general public. Indeed, many men were rejected for reasons that were not considered disabling by civilians.

As well as offering a glimpse at the character of rejected volunteers – including some individuals’ prewar life experiences – this prosopographic study provides a new foundation upon which to examine the characteristics of, and the interrelationships between, civilian, military and medical constructions of combat fitness. It also presents a point of departure for a consideration of how the military definitions of (in)ability are

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Doctoral Dissertation, Indiana University, 2005; David A. Gerber, ed., *Disabled Veterans in History*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Desmond Morton and J.L. Granatstein, *Marching to Armageddon : Canadians and the Great War 1914-1919*, (Toronto : Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1989), p.32; David Silbey, “Bodies and Cultures Collide: Enlistment, the Medical Exam, and the British Working Class, 1914-1916”, *Social History of Medicine*, Vol. 17, 2004, pp.61-76; Jay Winter, “Military Fitness”.

<sup>6</sup> Scott Gelber, “A ‘Hard-Boiled Order’: The Reeducation of Disabled WWI Veterans in New York City”, *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 39, No. 1, 2005, <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jsh/39.1/gelber.html> (accessed September 21, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Edwin Black, *War Against the Weak*, p.80-85; Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man*, Rev. Ed., (New York: Norton, 1996), pp.176-262.

formed and evolve according to circumstance. Many of the men rejected at Valcartier in 1914, would later serve in either Canada's or an allied country's armed forces due to the changing (lowering) of military medical requirements as the war continued and combatant countries experienced manpower crises.