

Ursula A. Kelly. *The Foresters' Scribe: Remembering the Newfoundland Forestry Companies through the First World War Letters of Regimental Quartermaster Sergeant John A. Barrett*. St. John's: ISER Books, 2020. ISBN 978-1-89472-573-6

With *Foresters' Scribe*, Ursula A. Kelly has produced a cogent, engaging, and long-overdue study of the Newfoundland Forestry Companies (NFC). It is a valuable addition to the existing literature on Newfoundland and Labrador's involvement in World War I.

The NFC formed in 1917 to help supply Britain with the timber it could no longer import due to wartime disruptions in shipping. The unit's 528 men travelled to Scotland, where they cut and milled wood for the Allied war effort. More than a century later, however, their story remains largely invisible in the history of the war. It is an omission that Kelly highlights in her introduction: "There exists no thorough account of the unit that details its emergence, its work in Scotland . . . and the importance of its contribution. In addition, there has been no analysis of what such an account might add to our understanding of the Great War" (6). *The Foresters' Scribe* does a commendable job of filling these gaps and of laying the groundwork for future research.

At the heart of this book are the 37 letters Regimental Quartermaster Sergeant John A. Barrett wrote while serving with the NFC, from its formation in 1917 until its disbandment in 1919. A journalist from Curling, Newfoundland, Barrett became the NFC's press correspondent and his letters home appeared in local newspapers, most notably the *Evening Herald* and *Western Star*. Taken together, his writings offer a unique and previously unexamined perspective on the war experience in prose that is clear and engaging (which is perhaps not surprising given his background in journalism).

Barrett writes extensively about the day-to-day operations of the NFC, noting that it is different from "ordinary" lumbering work because the camp is "conducted along military lines" (156). His letters delve into a myriad of other topics, too. Some read as a travelogue of Scotland, while others describe the "cultural interchange" (42) between

the visiting Newfoundlanders and resident Scots (they appear to have gotten along famously). Other topics include war brides (at least 30 members of the NFC married women from the United Kingdom), the friendly rivalry between Newfoundland and Canadian foresters (which sometimes manifested itself in logrolling competitions), and the ongoing attempts to recruit more volunteers into the Newfoundland forces (a function for which Barrett's letters sometimes served). Women and their evolving roles make several appearances, including in a letter dated 15 September 1917: "the women of the Empire have set a good example to our men, by donning khaki and overalls and engaging in work they were at one time looked upon as being incapable of performing. And they are doing it very creditably" (98).

As Kelly rightly points out, though, Barrett knew his letters would be reproduced in newspapers and his "correspondence focusses on the positive and avoids the controversial" (43). Kelly does a good job of addressing this lopsidedness by contrasting Barrett's personal and official letters, and by incorporating information from other documents, including attestation files and letters from other foresters.

Her research into the topic is impressive, as can be seen from the extensive bibliography. The many annotations that complement and augment the letters are one of the great strengths of this book. Kelly's notes illuminate the text without bogging it down, while her longer bridging passages (printed in a different font so the reader can easily distinguish them from the letters) provide a deeper dive into a wide range of topics touched upon in Barrett's letters. The asides are invariably informative and often entertaining. For example, after Barrett wonders in one letter why some parcels from home never made it to the anxious foresters, Kelly thoughtfully provides a write-up on "Parcel Lifters." It reproduces a report from the *Western Star*, dated 29 October 1917: "We know of one case in particular where a woman sending chocolates, tobacco, etc., to her husband, and stating the correct contents upon the packages, the articles were never received; but where she sent similar articles and marked them 'soap,' etc., they were received within reasonable time, and not one of them was mislaid.

Evidently everybody had ‘soap’ enough” (137).

Kelly’s contextualizing introduction and conclusion add further depth to the study. The introduction includes a biography of Barrett, a thorough history of the NFC, and an overview of the foresters themselves, noting that “[t]he cultural, linguistic, and geographic communities from which recruits came also included the Mi’kmaq and Francophones of the Island” (23). Importantly, Kelly places the unit within the wider context of Newfoundland and Labrador’s participation in World War I, and discusses how Barrett’s letters complement the existing literature on soldiers’ and nurses’ experiences.

The author states that one of her intentions in writing a book about the little-known military unit was to prompt “a rethinking of the dominant narrative of Newfoundland in The Great War” (35). This theme is nicely resurrected in her conclusion, where she questions why so much attention has been given to the Newfoundland Regiment’s Blue Puttees, while other aspects of the war experience remain underexplored. “A holistic and interconnected account of war and service would fairly and evenly credit all contributions, while ensuring that the unique contributions of diverse sectors to the war effort are understood and appreciated” (264). Kelly provides examples of under-represented units and groups, including “cultural communities other than Anglo St. John’s, such as Labradorians, Francophones, Indigenous Peoples, newer immigrant communities, and women” (267). Among other avenues ripe for future research are wartime marriages and their associated migrations, of both “the women who sailed to Newfoundland and the men who remained in Scotland” (248).

Rounding out the book are close to three dozen images and three appendices: a timeline of the NFC’s activities; a list of the 528 men who served (which also includes their age, occupation, and residence at enlistment); and an abridged five-part essay Barrett wrote for the *Western Star* in 1952, which includes information omitted from his wartime letters.

*The Foresters’ Scribe* is a rich depository of primary material, underpinned by insightful and fresh analysis that deepens our understanding

of Newfoundland and Labrador's experience in World War I. It accomplishes the admirable feat of combining scholarly rigour with an ease of readability and clarity of presentation that will appeal to a broad audience. Experts and the curious general reader will find much to enjoy.

Jenny Higgins

Maritime History Archive, Memorial University of Newfoundland