Winnipeg’s Great War: A City Comes of Age
by Jim Blanchard

Reviewed by Graeme Voyer

The First World War (1914–1918), known as the Great War until there was a second world war, was a cataclysmic event that involved most of the great powers of the time and had profound repercussions for Europe and the Europeanized world. The effects of the war on the city of Winnipeg are explored by Jim Blanchard in this work of popular narrative history. In particular, Blanchard documents the economic, political, and social impact of the war; these are the main themes of his account.

In Winnipeg, the effects of the war were ubiquitous. As Blanchard writes, “War was a daily reality, colouring everything, changing everything, derailing the bouncy confidence that had been the ethos of the place until then” (3).

The war had immediate consequences for Winnipeg’s economy. The onset of the conflict in 1914 triggered a downturn in economic activity. British capital had underwritten western Canadian growth, but British investors were now keeping their money in the British Isles.

By 1915 and 1916, economic conditions improved, stimulated by the demand for materiel created by the war. However, Winnipeg did not share in the wartime prosperity to the extent that Montreal and Toronto did.

Another characteristic of Winnipeg’s economy during the war was inflation. Prices rose steadily, and wages did not keep pace. Blanchard observes that “Even those with good jobs found that they were struggling to feed their families” (244).

This inflationary spiral resulted in two major developments: an upsurge in union membership and activity, and an expansion of the state, as government increasingly intervened to assume responsibility for the poor, a responsibility that had previously been the sphere of churches and private charities.

Another reflection of the expanded role of the state concomitant with the war was the enactment by the Manitoba provincial government of legislation prohibiting the sale and manufacture of alcoholic beverages—Prohibition.

A longer-lasting social consequence of the First World War concerned the status of women. Blanchard shows that Winnipeg women contributed enormously to the war effort, raising funds, knitting and sewing amenities for the troops. Their participation represented a compelling argument for women’s suffrage, which was granted in Manitoba in 1916.

But the most profound effect of the war on Winnipeg was the loss of hundreds of young men on the battlefields of Europe—all the potential they represented, everything they could have contributed to the future development of the city was lost forever.
Before the advent of war in 1914, Blanchard shows, Winnipeg was a bustling city whose citizens were avidly pursuing material wealth. But when war came, most Winnipeggers abandoned their dreams of avarice and sacrificed everything for a cause—the defence of the Empire. One wonders if Winnipeggers in 2011 would be so idealistic.

Graeme Voyer is a Winnipeg writer.

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