

War project seeks 'citizen historians'?

By Mark Pavilons

A British project is hoping Canadians can shed some light on service records from the First World War.

The global project will research the lives and wartime service of 'Geordies'—those from the North East of England—in the armies of Australia, New Zealand, Newfoundland and Canada during the First World War.

Dominion Geordies in World War One, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, will seek to crowdsource research by recruiting volunteer researchers in Canada and overseas.

'The first stage of the project will involve collecting information that will help us build a comprehensive and fascinating insight into the stories of so many of the local men and women of the North East who, having left their native land in the three decades or so before the war, found themselves volunteering to return and fight for the homeland in the campaigns of the war across the world,' said Dr. James McConnel, history lecturer at Northumbria University. 'By better understanding their complex identities, we hope to get a clearer picture of a fascinating aspect of the First World War that has been almost completely forgotten.'

Take, for example, George Burdon McKean. Originally from Willington, County Durham, he was a student at the University of Alberta when the war broke out and served in the Canadian Expeditionary Force. He was awarded the Victoria Cross, the Military Medal and, after he was commissioned as an officer, the Military Cross, making him one of only a handful of people who have won all three and survived the war.

The research will consider not only individual 'migration histories' like these, but also the way that individuals and communities saw their own identities as Geordies and Britons, but also Australians, Canadians or New Zealanders.

The information for the database will be gathered by 'citizen historians' and the 12-month project is open to anyone. All you need is an interest in the First World War.

Using this information, the project organizers plan to produce a short film and write a number of research papers in order to profile the men of the North East who fought in the armies of the Dominions.

'It will be an interesting and challenging project to work on,' McConnel commented. 'And we want to get as many people as possible involved, from experienced researchers to first-time historians. Participants will have the opportunity to learn the skills necessary to research the lost stories of these service men and women's lives and to work with other researchers across the world.'

'We are confident that anyone who can take the time to learn just a little about the scale and impact of the war will be encouraged to play a part in the project,' he added.

To volunteer to be part of the Dominion Geordies in World War One project or for more information, visit

<http://dominiongeordiesinww1.co.uk/> or contact james.mcconnel@northumbria.ac.uk