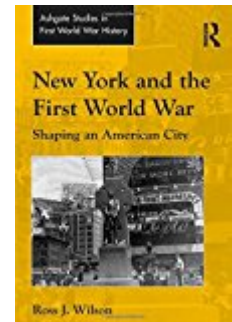


Ross J. Wilson. *New York and the First World War: Shaping an American City.*

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Reviewed by Shane Peterson

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Ross Wilson is a senior lecturer in the History Department of the University of Chichester, with degrees in both archaeology and history, who earned his PhD in 2008 at York. *New York in the First World War* is one of some seventeen Ashgate monographs in an ongoing series on World War One. The main task of research and writing was done while the author was living in the New York. While archives such as the Design Commission of New York and historical documents such as a letter from Theodore Roosevelt were consulted, as this is a work on public opinions as much as government policy, newspapers, magazines, and other periodicals were primary. Over forty periodicals were surveyed, well beyond the major newspapers of the day. The bibliography of secondary works is up to date, including works that tend to push the start of the civil rights movement back to the mid-1920s, as a result of the postwar Bonus Act. This work seems slated to be sold to research libraries, due to the inherent academic style and high price tag. The reader is asked to

overlook these factors due to the timely and important questions the author asks.

Wilson investigates the impact of World War One on New York and the memory of the war in the city. This work adds the great city to others that were transformed by the Great War, such as Paris, London, Berlin, and Rome. Wilson clearly shows that New York did not have to experience zeppelins in its skies or shellfire falling on a church to be deeply affected by the war from its very beginning in 1914. While the study of the city's history before, during and after the war is conscientious, that is not the only issue to be found in the work. Wilson, like many European historians, seems to ask a larger question: Why have Americans forgotten World War I? On page eight of his introduction he notes, "The apparent absence of memory of the First World War in the United States is almost regarded by some European historians to be a national failing." Wilson may have found part of the answer for the entire

nation, even when looking only at the city. If this was an accident, it is a most welcome one.

While Wilson starts with idea of New York as an outsider's city that was seen by the larger nation as a threat in need of reform, this does not eliminate the city as a surrogate for the American people writ large. His thesis, which posits that the emergence of a national ethic of "one hundred percent Americanism" replaced the memory of the war, brings the reader (and perhaps Wilson himself) to the threshold of what may be the real answer to the question of why the war was largely forgotten: the vexing matter of race in America.

The reviewer found the treatment of the city's wartime Americanization program and its main slogan "One Hundred Percent Americanism" to be hard to track in the details and full intent. It may be a measure of just how deeply Wilson immersed himself in the era that he appears to be an apologist for the program while duly noting fear and racism that animated the city's aristocracy, including the notorious nativist eugenicist Madison Grant.

Wilson notes that by 1916 the city "had declared a tacit war upon itself," pressing newcomers to self-administer a loyalty oath posted around the city (p. 138). This effort at conformity, writes Wilson "was nevertheless presented as inherently liberating" (p. 137). In his conclusion, Wilson points to the postwar memorials created by different groups as "their own statements of belonging," with the memory of the war lost due to the "successful incorporation" of these groups' "identity" into the city (pp. 217-218). The reviewer has doubts. In the end, the program seems to have stopped short of what was needed. The program needed the rewards as well as the punishments, the rights as well as the responsibilities, that make for an effective social contract.

Wilson links the slogan "One Hundred Percent Americanism" to the American Legion veterans group, and there is little doubt the Legion knew and used the phrase. What Dr. Wilson does

not mention is that it was also taken up by the white supremacist Ku Klux Klan. The kind of America the Klan wanted is well known, an America that was Protestant as well as white: no Jewish war heroes, no Catholic war heroes, and most certainly no African American war heroes. This is not a step or a connection that Wilson makes, nor should he be faulted for not making it. It is the reviewer who wonders if in the end we may find that the war was not so much forgotten as buried under layers of whitewash.

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