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Review of *The Caretakers: War Graves Gardeners and the Secret Battle to Rescue Allied Airmen in World War II* by Caitlin Galante DeAngelis

Timothy Halstead

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disagreements, and since the end of the Second World War, Canada has stood mostly by the United States to show that it is still a neighbour and ally.

CAMERON TELCH
Mount Saint Vincent University, Canada
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Caitlin Galante DeAngelis, *The Caretakers: War Graves Gardeners and the Secret Battle to Rescue Allied Airmen in World War II*. Essex, CT: Prometheus, 2024. xviii + 338 pp. 3 maps. ISBN 978-1163388899 (hardback). Price £25.

Caitlin Galante DeAngelis offers the first scholarly account of the work of a group of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, formerly the Imperial War Graves Commission (hereinafter the Commission) employees and their families. It adds to a growing body of work to explain the Commission's role. Philip Longworth's *The Unending Vigil* (1985) is devoted to the Commission's formation and work commemorating the dead of both world wars. While Robert Sackville-West's *The Searchers* (2021) offers an overview of commemoration of the First World War dead which ties the work of the Commission in with the wider work of remembrance. David Crane's *Empires of the Dead* (2013) is a biography of the Commission's founder, Sir Fabian Ware. Up until now, there has been little discussion of the ordinary men and women who have worked for the Commission.

DeAngelis gives a detailed account of those British who were left behind when the Germans occupied France in 1940. Despite being let down by the Commission, a substantial number played an active part in resistance to the Germans. The author argues that the Commission badly let down its British staff, many of whom were veterans of the First World War who had stayed in France and in effect left them and their families to their own devices. In contrast, those in Belgium benefitted from a carefully constructed evacuation plan which worked well in difficult circumstances. While in France, the Commission's chief administrative officer, Brigadier Prower told his staff to stay put until instructed otherwise by the civil authorities, believing the French Army to be one of the best in the world and likely to repel any invasion. It was a view held by many including Ware. 39% of the French staff were stranded in France, in contrast, in Belgium only 12% suffered a similar fate. Prower was unsuited to his role in wartime and despite telling others to stay put left with his family ahead of instructions from the authorities, omitting to tell his staff he was doing so. In public,

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Ware defended the work of Prower but squeezed him out of the organisation because of his shortcomings.

Those left behind, had little support from the Commission, who on legal advice dismissed them. Several of them were interned and DeAngelis offers an account of their treatment. Among those who remained free many set out to resist the Germans. The community they had formed before the war meant there already existed a network which helped them in their work to assist shot down airmen. Not only did they hate the German occupiers but they also had a strong calling to support the British Empire, unlike the wider French population which also hated the Germans but felt let down by the British. DeAngelis illustrates this tale of resistance by focussing on the work of two gardeners, who remained free and the wife of an interned gardener. One paid with his life, one was sent to a concentration camp but survived and one evaded arrest despite their substantial activity to save airmen from arrest. As the war progressed, the Commission's cemeteries served as a symbol of resistance with the population attending funerals of dead airmen and leaving tributes on their graves. This was something the Germans were not able to stamp out.

The author has drawn on a wide range of sources, including the Commission's archives, archives in France, the UK and USA as well as many published and unpublished memoirs. A bibliography would have been appreciated. This preference excepted; DeAngelis's book is an important contribution to the work of the Commission. It tells of the work of ordinary men and women in difficult and dangerous circumstances. DeAngelis is critical of many aspects of the way Commission went about its work in relation to its people left behind in France during and after the war. One could quibble about some of these judgements but as venerated as the Commission is for its work, our understanding of it will not be helped by unquestioning admiration. This is a welcome addition to the historiography of Commemoration. May it also act as an encouragement for others to widen understanding of the Commission's work.

TIMOTHY HALSTEAD

Independent Researcher, UK

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