The Second World War transformed Montreal, too

Author records life of the city: its sorrows and joys during pivotal era

Life on the Home Front: Montreal 1939-1945, by Patricia Burns (Véhicule Press, 292 pages, $20)

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Profile and review by: Jeff Heinrich

Patricia Burns is coy about her age – surprising, perhaps, for someone who routinely pokes her amateur historian's nose into other people's pasts, specifically lives lived during the Second World War. "Just say 'She was too young to remember the war.' I don't want to be turfed off the junior team at the tennis club, that's the problem," the author said with a laugh as she sat down for a pre-Remembrance Day interview.

Her birth year is no mystery, however. It's right there on the copyright page of her new book, and under some prompting (and a show of dismay that "1939" is so clear for all to see), Burns came clean: She was born just two months before the invasion of Poland. But again, "I have no memory of the war," the retired schoolteacher said in her neatly appointed duplex apartment on Mariette Avenue in N.D.G.

Well, almost no memory.

Though her recollections of the time are second-hand, her understanding of it is remarkably vivid. With keen interest, she has plowed through memoirs and history books and newspaper articles, watched documentary films, listened to vintage music recordings, surfed the Web on her old PC and – the most original part of her research – talked to people who were there and old enough to remember.

Now, after four long years gleaning the material, Burns has published her winnowings in a paperback book from Véhicule Press called Life on the Home Front: Montreal 1939-1945. Arranged chronologically and by theme – 10 chapters over 292 pages, with 45 photos and other illustrations – her research depicts a city which, though far from the battlefields of Europe, Asia and Africa, was transformed by war.

To borrow from Dickens, it was the best of times and the worst of times for Canada's most important city. Best, because many of its citizens had a sense of common purpose, industry was booming and this bustling port was humming with

nightlife. Worst, because there were refugees, rationing, roundups of "enemy aliens," price-gouging, a French-English divide over conscription, and loved ones lost overseas.

As a child, Burns was insulated from most of it. She was the eldest of what would bloom into a family of eight children (including an adopted older brother, her cousin) in an Irish Catholic household. Her father, a CPR clerk, was too old to enlist; he volunteered in civil defence and spent the war working at Windsor Station. There were no war victims in Burns' family, save for a cousin lost in France.

"I had no experience of suffering – you know, like relatives piling into the house because they had no place to live – but talking about the time with people, it has come alive for me," Burns said over a cup of coffee, the mug labelled "Till We Meet Again," the old WWI song. Outside her dining-room window, half a block away, a train rumbled by; outside her living-room window, across the street, stands the house she grew up in.

Her book is full of firsthand accounts of life back then.

There are working-class women like Rita Melanson, who came from New Brunswick and earned 70 cents an hour at the CIL munitions factory; and Rosalie Eberwein Stoss, an innocent German immigrant victimized by anti-Nazi sentiment. There are rich ladies, too, like Westmount hostess Betty Burland Jennings, who entertained servicemen at the Badminton Club.

Soldiers have their say, too. Some missed Montreal entirely during the war: Arthur Fraser enlisted in the army at 17 and spent three years in a German POW camp; when he returned home in May 1945 he weighed only 90 pounds. Some spoke on condition of anonymity: at 18, a young sailor named "Roger" recalled visiting his first brothel on Ontario St. ("Seven or eight girls started parading and we made our choice.")

We meet teenagers like Arthur Stanway, a 16-year-old who in 1941 designed and built a full-sized model Messerschmitt 109 and "crashed" it in Westmount Park as a publicity stunt for Victory Bonds, then in 1944 went on to enlist and fly in the Royal Canadian Air Force. We meet refugees like Edgar (Eddie) Lion, a Viennese-born Jew who was interned in England, shipped to Canada and finally released in late 1941; he spent the rest of the war studying civil engineering at McGill University.

There were plays at the Montreal Repertory Theatre (and the Tin Hat Revue and the Army Show). And there was music. The Johnny Holmes Orchestra played Victoria Hall in Westmount, with a teenage Oscar Peterson on piano. At the

unlicensed Chez Maurice Danceland, teenagers jived to Jimmy Dorsey, Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway, and the Music Box in the Mount Royal Hotel was where you went to dance with dashing young airmen or the hotshot civilian pilots of Ferry Command.

There are surprises in Burn's book, too, like the fact that "enemy" Japanese Canadians numbered only a couple of dozen here during the war. Burns found one for her book, Betty Kobayashi Issenman, a woman of mixed Japanese-Scottish background who avoided internment but suffered a host of humiliations: fingerprinted by the RCMP, made to report to the police once a month, refused a job as a social worker in the Canadian Army. She now lives in Halifax.

"I really worried about finding any Japanese, because they were basically all out West," Burns recalled of the research that led to Issenman. "Then I went to the funeral of a Ukrainian friend and – because, you know, I talk to everyone – I struck up a conversation with this Japanese woman, and she put me in touch with Betty. I never would have found her otherwise, but by email and the letters she sent me, we became best friends, even though we've never met. She really is an amazing woman."

There's also previously unpublished archive material, like the poignant letter that Robert Boulanger, an 18-year-old soldier from Grand-Mère, addressed to his parents just before the raid on Dieppe in Aug. 1942. The letter survived the war in a waterproof bag kept by a friend who ended up in a German POW camp. Boulanger's niece in Victoriaville showed it to Burns.

"Someone told us we are very close to the French coast," Boulanger wrote as his landing craft moved through slowly through the dawn light to its destination. "I believe it because we can hear the gunfire and explosions, even the whistling of the shells which pass over our heads. I finally realize that we are no longer doing an exercise ... Oh my God! Protect us ..." Minutes later, Boulanger was killed.

The drama of human lives has long fascinated Burns. At a basic everyday level, she witnessed a great deal in a long career in education, teaching English as a second language in French schools on the South Shore before retiring in 2000. At the same time, her people's dramatic history has pulled at her: She got deep into her Irish roots with the St. Patrick's Society and, in 1998, published her first book, The Shamrock and the Shield: An Oral History of the Irish in Montreal.

That same year, Burns took a life-changing trip to Normandy to see her cousin's grave, and that experience – the first to touch her deeply from a period she was too young to know – led her to write her second book, They Were So Young: Montrealers Remember World War II, published in 2002. Getting veterans to open up about their experiences taught her the importance of the interview.

"If you do it right, people tend to trust you - anyway, I do my best," she said, explaining her method. "I do the research, I go with a tape recorder – an ancient, cassette-tape recorder; I can't go poking around with the small ones they make now – I tape the interview, come home, transcribe it, print it and then go back (to the interviewee) and submit it for criticism and corrections.

"This is very important to people. They want to get it right and I want it to get it right."

Unlike her previous books, Life on the Home Front is only half oral-history; the rest is straightforward research done the old-fashioned way, including many hours spent trawling through The Gazette's archives and reading the newspaper's Canada at War series, published in 1989. The result is a remarkably detailed picture of ordinary life in the city during those extraordinary times.

The war still haunts the Montreal she knows today.

"I cannot look at a young boy, any group of young boys, without thinking: How did we do it to them (back then)? How did we put that torture to them?'" she said.

"That little kid sitting in McDonald's having his lunch, imagine, we put (his great-grandfather) in a Hercules or a Spitfire or a big ship, put gear on his back and told him: 'Go and fight for six years, you're not going to have a bath very often and you're going to lose most of your buddies.' This affects me.

What's the one message readers should take away from the book?

"The absolute respect we should give to people who sacrificed their family members to war," Burns replied. "My hope is that younger people will read the book. Older people who've read it have said 'Oh, it brought back so many memories.' Well, they have the memories and don't need the book. Young people do."

People ask her what she's working on next, but – like her age – Burns is reluctant to give them an easy answer. After four long years getting this book together, she's in no hurry to get started on the next one. "It's like you come out of the hospital carrying a 15-pound baby and people ask you, 'When are you going to have another one?' I just want to clean my house," she said with a laugh.

"No, really, I just want to get back to normal life and get back to my friends. I want to stop being a war bore."