

"From the Boys at the Front"

George Matheson reads the letters that his grandparents received during WWI



As wartime extended into months and then years, they were swept up into the new reality of life both on the home front and in the trenches. That was partly because my grandmother's brother, Fred, had become a soldier; however it was mainly because many of my grandfather's parishioners had signed up.

Recently, I came across, in the attic of my grandparents' house, in addition to the correspondence from Fred, bundles of letters, photos, and postcards labelled: "from the boys at the front." Some were carefully written on stationery provided to the soldiers while many were hastily scrawled (often in pencil) on torn, ragged, or disintegrating, paper. All had been screened by a censor and labelled or stamped as "cleared."

As I read through these messages, I was struck by two contrasting, and often intertwining themes; one being the awful reality of life (and death) at the Front and the other, the sense of "ongoing" life either as experienced within that reality or as carried over in memories of life back home.



For the pastor and his wife, the 4th of August 1914 was a quiet summer day. The Tuesday following the long Civic Holiday weekend, with many of his parishioners still away, my grandfather was relaxing at home as my grandmother tended to "the babe." Their first child, my mother, was barely 7 weeks old and they were still basking in the novelty of parenthood.

The familiar sense of peace that pervaded the household

was disrupted only momentarily by the news that England had declared war on Germany. This conflict was happening far away and was expected to be over by Christmas — no one imagined the extent of Canada's involvement or the hardship and bloodshed the next four years would bring. But my grandparents would come to look back on that day as the point when peacetime ended and the world as they knew it would never be the same.

A letter from Pvt. Alfred Preston (positioned on right) from “somewhere in France” in Nov. 1917 illustrates this, starting off:

... We have had a month of fine weather and everything has dried up fine making the question of transport much easier to say nothing of the comfort of the boys. The countryside begins to look fine, the trees are in leaf and the wildflowers are abundant in the woods around.

then shifting to:

Of course where the fighting has been is nothing but a waste of shell holes and ruin, a more distressful scene you could not imagine. It will take many years to wipe out the scars of this awful war.

Another parishioner, Cyril Gerega, who in 1916 was sending beautifully hand embroidered postcards to my grandparents, in a January 2nd 1917 letter expands graphically:

I have not had time since I came to France to do anything except work. We have been in the big push at the Somme for some time and have met with splendid success and not one repulse. Many poor fellows have fallen but we feel that we are in the right, and if we die we die for a just cause. No one knows when his time has come but everyone is cheerful and right. We are having very bad weather nearly all the time. It is a punishment of which you can form no idea. For three days and nights we have been able to do nothing but shiver and whimper and yet we must carry on. To sleep in a trench full of water has no equivalent in Danté but what of the waiting when you have to watch for the moment to kill or to be killed. You must never know what man can do.

For days my boots have been full with human brains. I have been treading on throats and stepping on entrails. Two dear friends one of whom made a charming model for my last portrait have been killed.

According to his Attestation Paper, Gerega had signed up in 1915, becoming the first of my grandfather's parishioners to be shipped overseas. Finding no further letters from him, and knowing that over a million soldiers had died in the Battle of the Somme, I had my doubts that he'd survived. However, a search of Canadian war records revealed that later he'd been promoted to Sgt. and, in January 1918, was awarded the Cross of St. George 4th Class for an act of extreme bravery. I was somehow relieved to know that he had survived and lived to “grow old.”

A barely legible note dated December 2, 1917 from a soldier my grandfather didn't know gives news about a parishioner



who wasn't so lucky:

I have the painful duty of writing to inform you of your dear friend Slater's death. He was killed in action towards the end of October. A German sniper shot him during the advance on their fortification. He died very quickly and did not realize what happened to him...

And with a personal touch he adds:

The parcel you sent for Slater arrived a few days ago and in accordance with our usual procedure in such case was opened by an officer and all eatables distributed amongst his friends. Personal property is always returned except anything in the nature of socks.

(Socks helped soldiers deal with Trench foot, a common medical condition caused by prolonged exposure of the feet

to damp, unsanitary and cold conditions in the trenches.)

Many of the letters I read began: "Just a line to thank you for the parcel from the Church" and went on to talk about how much the contents were appreciated. My grandmother and the ladies at church had worked hard - knitting socks and searching out scarce "luxuries" like chocolate - for 'the boys' while my grandfather kept busy responding to their letters.

His letters were as vital as the welcomed gifts. They not only assured soldiers that they were not forgotten but gave them a sense of still being part of the routine, the mundane — the home life they remembered. In a letter dated December 9, 1917, Corp. Thompson explains their importance:

Well there is not much that we can write about here but you can see by the papers just what we are doing...the longer the war continues the more necessary your letters become if the blues are to be routed. Parcels are scarce but we can understand that, letters do not cost any more than they did in 1914 and a cheery long letter is much more valuable to us than everything else so write often and long ones. Things may seem old to you but every bit of news is news to us. Do not let your correspondence cease even if you have only met the friend once or twice. Remember that since he joined the Army or Navy life has been at a standstill. The last meeting he had with the folks and friends at home he remembers as if it were yesterday...tell him about the books you have read or the play you have seen...about everything...but about the war do

not write — that is what we are trying to forget Heaven knows. We have seen enough of it.

When mail did not come, worry and anger blended with the growing fear of being forgotten. One soldier explains:

Try and picture yourself coming out of the line after a heavy battle where you have lost a number of your chums and friends. Then mail comes up. You hear it called out and you look around and see the largest number turning away with these words. "No letter for me again. Alright two can play at this game," and he does not write. Maybe the letters that have been sent to him have gone down on the way over; maybe someone has stopped writing because they have only received a field card. Sometimes they may only send a few lines saying that they are well at home... Please tell the people that some get the idea into their heads that the longer the war goes on the more the people and friends at home forget about them. There's enough to grouse about over here and the longer the war continues the more necessary your letters become if the blues are to be routed.

Another soldier, whose signature wasn't legible and who addressed his message simply to "Members of the Church," was obviously weighted down by loneliness and the transience of life when he made this request:

There was a young man from your church who gave me a testament from your church. But I do not know his name or company he is in. If you know his

name let me know so I can get acquainted with him as there is not many of the 120 men left now. As we have been through some hard fighting, there is only about three men left in my company.

Another parishioner, Tom Dashper, whom I remember from the 1950s as an elderly man who never missed a Sunday church service, was clearly feeling alone just before Christmas 1917:

Received your letter a few days ago... I only wish I was there to enjoy the work with you... but I thank God that I can send out a prayer to him when I am on duty in the trenches. I have often looked up at the stars and thought how happy you all must be back in the little church at home.

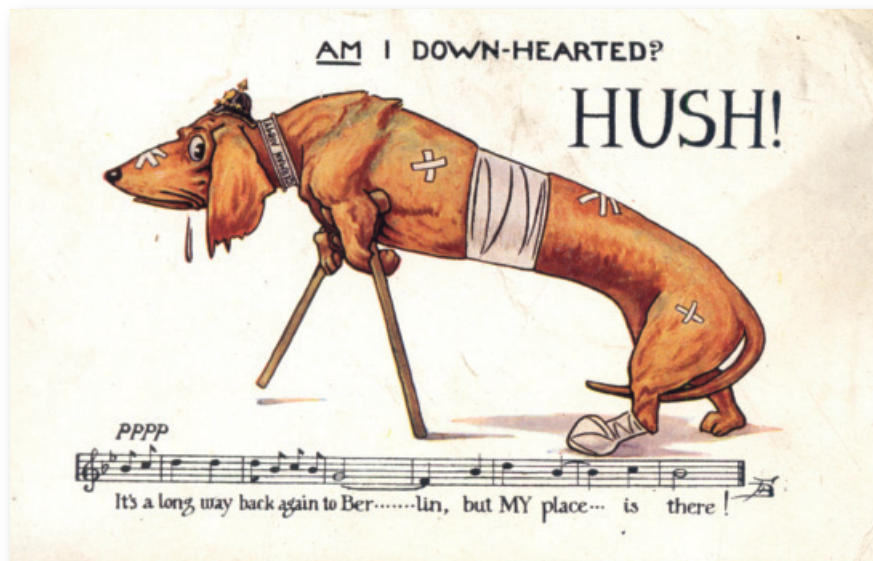
Understandably, the tone of messages was often serious and sombre but some soldiers tried for a bit of lightness — even humour. Often, my grandmother's brother Fred, would describe his experiences somewhat light-heartedly:

We were digging trenches all last week and Friday night we went out at 9 PM and came in about 11. It started to rain just after we got out and rained all night. It was so dark you could hardly see a foot ahead. The officer got lost when he was bringing us in and went away off the road. We got soaked pretty nearly through and got up Saturday morning and went for a 10 mile march — in three hours — with full packs. That wasn't enough to kill us so they called the Muster Parade at 1 PM.

Earlier, about the voyage over, he'd written:

We landed off the boat on Monday the 18th I can't say where. We were not at all sorry to see land I don't want another trip like that again. It was a small ship and we were packed like sardines and the food was rotten. We had hammocks to sleep in but most of us took either the tables or the floors for it was too hot in the hammocks. When we were sleeping on the tables, if the boat would take much of a roll, we would slide from one end to the other. ... We had to wear life belts all the way and have them by our heads when sleeping. I didn't have my clothes off all the way. Outside of all the little inconveniences though I enjoyed the trip fine and especially the train ride down to the camp.

A postcard he sent to his young niece, my mother, toward the end of the war when she was four years old, struck a powerful chord. On the front is a humorous depiction of the losing German Army on crutches.



On the back the message reads:

Dear Kathleen:

I wish you were here to hold my hands and warm them. It is quite cold and very windy today. I had to get up six times last night to close the door, the wind kept blowing it open...

On the face of it, the war was about the cold reality of battle and the fight for victory. But for each soldier, as comes across in these bundles of postcards and letters from "the boys at the front," it was also about the fullness of life, warmth of family and friends and connection with home. ■

(All images courtesy of author's collection)

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