

**“THAT OLD OCEAN IS A TREMENDOUS BARRIER BETWEEN US AND HOME”: HOW  
YOUNG PEOPLE AND THEIR FAMILIES SPOKE ACROSS DISTANCE DURING THE FIRST  
WORLD WAR**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Thousands of miles and countless other barriers — including illiteracy, technological limitations and experiential differences — distanced soldiers serving in the First World War from their families living in the Canadian Prairie Provinces. This thesis draws on hundreds of letters sent between these families to examine the numerous strategies they used to overcome this distance maintain their relationships during the conflict. It examines in depth the work that young people (under the age of twenty-five) performed within their families and draws on methods from social history to uncover their unique experiences.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CEF	Canadian Expeditionary Force
GA	Glenbow Archives
CLIP	Canadian Letters and Images Project

## Introduction

Ivy Redman and her six siblings — George, Eric, Leslie, Russell, Winifred and Constance — were born in Norfolk, England, where they lived in a small home with their parents and four lodgers. In 1905, the family packed onto an ocean liner and left England behind for a 160-acre homestead near Regina, Saskatchewan.<sup>1</sup> In 1916, Ivy's older brothers George and Eric enlisted with the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) and travelled over 6,000 kilometers back to Europe.<sup>2</sup> They were quickly joined by their nineteen-year-old brother Leslie and their younger brother Russell, who lied about his age to enlist at fourteen, and spent most of the war in a young soldiers battalion after his real age was discovered.<sup>3</sup> This thesis examines how families like the Redmans navigated the immense distance the First World War created; these young people who had spent most of their lives in physical proximity to one and other, squished inside their small home in Norfolk and then a small shack outside Regina, were now separated by an ocean.

Unlike soldiers from France, England, Germany, and other European countries, the vast majority of Canadian soldiers did not receive home leave and therefore did not see their families until they returned to Canada after demobilization or injury. This forced Canadian

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<sup>1</sup> *Census of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta*, 1916, District 27 Regina, page 3.

<sup>2</sup> Note: The 1916 census lists Eric's birthdate as 1895 but his attestation paper lists 27/12/1894. LAC, Attestation Papers Canadian Expeditionary Force, George Redman; LAC, Attestation Papers Canadian Expeditionary Force, Eric Redman; *Census of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta*, 1916, District 27 Regina, page 3.

<sup>3</sup> A note is handwritten on Russell attestation paper saying he was actually born in 1900, this matches his age on the 1916 census. His attestation papers also show that he was struck off strength for being underage. LAC, Attestation Papers Canadian Expeditionary Force, Leslie Redman; LAC, Attestation Papers Canadian Expeditionary Force, Russell Redman *Census of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta*, 1916, District 27 Regina, page 3.



families to conduct nearly all of their communication through letters, which took at least three weeks to travel from the Western Front to Canada. This temporal delay added another dimension of distance for families to cope with. Civilians and soldiers also had vastly different wartime experiences which created yet another distance they needed to communicate across. Finally, the five Brook children, who were all under the age of eight when their father Sidney enlisted in 1916, were further separated from their father by their youth and consequent skill and ability as they could not write detailed letters and therefore relied on their mother, Isabelle, to translate Sidney's written prose into oral conversations they could understand.<sup>4</sup> Sadly, for many families, including the Redmans and Brooks, the division between soldiers and their loved ones was furthered by death. This thesis will examine the many distances that existed between soldiers and their families in the First World War and the numerous strategies they employed to traverse this distance and maintain their relationships.

To do so it will draw on approximately 600 letters exchanged between seven families living on the Canadian Prairies. These letters are housed at Vancouver Island University, through the Canadian Letters and Images Project, and the Glenbow Archives. These collections were chosen because they met the following criteria: they contained letters that were sent from soldiers (under the age of twenty-five) to their sisters (under the age of twenty-five) or from soldiers to their children; the families lived in a rural location in Alberta, Saskatchewan, or Manitoba during the war; and finally, the collections contained at least four months of correspondence. It is important that collections had at least four months of correspondence to identify patterns and

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<sup>4</sup> GA, Brook Family Fonds.

irregularities in letters. Drawing from a limited number of archives allowed me to examine all the letters that met these criteria, meaning that no collections were excluded because of the content of the letters.

The Brook Family Fonds, which are examined in depth in the third chapter, is the only collection containing numerous letters from both the homefront and warfront.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, most of the letters sent from civilians to soldiers have been lost as soldiers could not hold on to mass amounts of paper correspondence while they travelled across France and Belgium and were therefore forced to destroy most of their letters after reading them. This thesis aims to uncover the experiences of homefront families, whose letters have been lost, by reading the letters they received from soldiers “against the grain” or “between the lines.” Letters are an ideal source to “read between the lines” because they were dialogues created in tandem by both the writer and the recipient.<sup>6</sup>

These letters were analyzed using three different methods. Inspired by the work of epistolary historians like Martyn Lyons and David Gerber, the first chapter will examine how families used letters, and other means of communication like parcels and telegrams, to communicate during the war.<sup>7</sup> It will consider how families used these tools to speak across distance and also how these tools added layers of distance and complexity to their wartime experiences. While the first chapter examines families (mothers, fathers, and children) as a whole, the second chapter focuses exclusively on

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<sup>5</sup> GA, Brook Family Fonds.

<sup>6</sup> David A. Gerber, “Acts of Deceiving and Withholding in Immigrant Letters: Personal Identity and Self-Presentation in Personal Correspondence,” *Journal of Social History* 39/2 (2005): 320.

<sup>7</sup> Martyn Lyons, *The Writing Culture of Ordinary People in Europe, c. 1860-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); David Gerber, *Authors of Their Lives: The Personal Correspondence of British Immigrants to North America in the Nineteenth Century* (New York & London: NYU Press, 2005).

the relationships between brothers and sisters by examining the experiences of many pairs of brothers and sisters all under the age of twenty-five. This method of isolation has been drawn from Michael Roper's work *The Secret Battle*, in which he used letters to examine the relationships between mothers and their soldier sons. By focusing on a single type of relationship, Roper demonstrated the crucial emotional support British mothers provided to their sons during the war.<sup>8</sup> The third and final chapter is a micro study of a single family. This approach has been championed by Martha Hanna, who examined the wartime experiences of Paul and Marie Pireaud a young French peasant couple who left behind an especially rich historical record (the letters from both Paul and Marie were saved), to demonstrate how this ordinary family coped with the trauma of war.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the final chapter of this thesis will examine the experiences of the Brook family, whose letters from the homefront and warfront have both been saved in the Glenbow Archives, to examine how this family maintained its emotional bonds in the face of great wartime challenges.<sup>10</sup>

Letters are an ideal source to examine how families spoke across distance because they were one of the most effective tools families had. Although they provide immense insight into family relationships they also pose many challenges. Firstly, letters in modern archives are more likely to be from families with strong connections because these families would be more likely to communicate regularly and save their loved ones'

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Roper, *The Secret Battle: Emotional Survival in the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> Martha Hanna, *Your Death Would be Mine: Paul and Marie Pireaud in the Great War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> GA, Brook Family Fonds.

letters after the war. Further, of the eleven soldiers examined in this study, six were killed in battle.<sup>11</sup> This is far above the average, suggesting that families of soldiers who were killed may have been more likely to preserve wartime letters. Like many historical sources, letters are also problematic because they may have been edited by family members, who may have removed embarrassing letters, such as those discussing illegal acts or family conflict. At the same time, however the presence of some family conflicts (such as Lillian and George Lamb's fight) and illegal acts (such as killing prisoners of war) in the letters I examined suggests that many collections were not highly edited.<sup>12</sup>

This study examines the work – particularly the emotional labour – that families performed as to maintain relations while physically separated. I am especially interested in the experiences and work of young adults and children. Understanding the experiences of young people during the First World War is vital to our understanding of this event in general, as young Canadians greatly effected and were affected by the conflict. Approximately 20% of the over 600,000 Canadian men who enlisted were married with children, and an even larger number of children had brothers, uncles, or friends overseas.<sup>13</sup> A significant portion of the soldiers serving in the CEF were also young themselves as the average age of enlistment was twenty-six, and approximately 20,000 underage boys enlisted.<sup>14</sup> Studying the experiences of young people during the war also provides insight into the work that families performed to

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<sup>11</sup> Although is a study of seven families, there are eleven soldiers because numerous brothers served from some the same family.

<sup>12</sup> For a further discussion of the problems that arise when decoding historical letter see: David Gerber, *Authors of Their Lives*, 10-11.

<sup>13</sup>Tim Cook, "The Canadian Great War Soldier," The Canadian Encyclopedia, April 9, 2018, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/the-canadian-great-war-soldier>.

<sup>14</sup> Desmond Morton, *When Your Number's Up: The Canadian Soldier in the First World War* (Toronto, Random House of Canada, 1993), 279; Tim, Cook, "The Canadian Great War Soldier."

create and sustain their emotional bonds during the early twentieth century more broadly. Although families performed many kinds of labour during this period, it is often difficult for historians to see this work, as much of it was done verbally and few records have been left. When the First World War separated families, it forced them to do this work through letters, creating a written record that historians can analyze.<sup>15</sup>

Until recently, the examination of young Canadians in the First World War was also a largely “untouched” area. However, historians have begun reconstructing an understanding of these young people’s experiences.<sup>16</sup> An early examination comes from Norah Lewis, who used the letters children wrote to *The Grain Growers Guide* to argue that many Canadian children were enthusiastic about the war and eagerly supported it with unpaid labour because they “believed their efforts made a difference.”<sup>17</sup> Kristine Moruzi built on Lewis’s work by using children’s letters to newspaper clubs to argue that children living in the Canadian Prairies often saw the war as a “very cruel thing” but also supported their country’s war effort through unpaid labour.<sup>18</sup> Literary scholars such as Elizabeth Galway and Susan Fisher have examined how the literature children read before and during the First World War shaped their identities and understandings of the conflict.<sup>19</sup> Fisher’s work also demonstrates how the First World War entered children’s classrooms and how young people contribute to the war through unpaid

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<sup>15</sup> Kristine Alexander, “Canadian Families and Letter Writing During the First World War,” Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Insight Grant Application, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> For an overview of this field see: Amy Shaw, “Expanding the Narrative: A First World War with Women, Children, and Grief,” *The Canadian Historical Review* 95/3 (2014): 401.

<sup>17</sup> Norah Lewis, “‘Isn’t this a terrible war?’ The Attitudes of Children in Two World Wars,” *Historical Studies in Education* 7/2, (1995): 203-204.

<sup>18</sup> Kristine Moruzi, “‘A Very Cruel Thing’: Canadian Children, the First World War, and the *Grain Growers Guide*,” in *Children’s Literature and Culture of the First World War*, ed. Rosemary Ross Johnston, Lissa Paul, and Emma Short, 214 -225 (New York: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Galway, *From Nursery Rhymes to Nationhood: Children’s Literature and the Construction of Canadian Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

labour.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, numerous scholars have examined how war work, patriotic lessons, and war games brought the war into children's classrooms.<sup>21</sup> Much of the research about Canadian children has focussed on their public lives, including the letters they wrote to newspapers, their volunteer labour, and classroom activities. Kristine Alexander brought this study into children's homes by examining the letters exchanged between young girls and their enlisted fathers. She argues that the girls expressed hope but also sadness and frustration.<sup>22</sup> This thesis will build on the work of these scholars by further examining the experiences of young Canadians, and specifically how they worked to maintain connections with their enlisted relatives.

The experiences of children in the First World War have also been examined on an international level. Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau opened this field by examining the literature and propaganda that French children interacted with during the war.<sup>23</sup> Rosie Kennedy expanded this study by examining how British children responded to and experienced the war's intrusion into their lives through a loved one's enlistment, toys, work and school.<sup>24</sup> Of special importance to

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<sup>20</sup> Susan Fisher, *Boys and Girls in No Man's Land: English Canadian Children and the First World War* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2011).

<sup>21</sup> Mark Moss, *Manliness and Militarism: Educating Young Boys in Ontario for War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Sarah Glassford, "Bearing the Burden of Their Elders: English-Canadian Children's First World War Red Cross Work and Its Legacies," *Études canadiennes/Canadian Studies* 80 (2016): 129-150; Anne Millar and Jeff Keshen, "Rallying Young Canada to the Cause: Anglophone Schoolchildren in Montreal and Toronto during the Two World Wars," *History of Intellectual Culture* 9/1 (2011), 1-16; Kristine Alexander, "Education during the First World War," *Wartime Canada*, <http://wartimecanada.ca>; Robert Stamp, "Empire Day in the Schools of Ontario: The Training of Young Imperialists," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 8/3 (1973), 32-42. Ashley Henrickson, "The War at School: The Experiences of Albertan School Children during World War One." *Alberta History* 66/4 (2018), 16-24.

<sup>22</sup> Kristine Alexander, "An Honour and a Burden: Canadian Girls and the Great War," in *A Sisterhood of Suffering and Service: Women and Girls of Canada and Newfoundland During the First World War*, ed. Sarah Glassford and Amy Shaw, 173-194 (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2012).

<sup>23</sup> Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, *La Guerre des Enfants 1914-1918: Essai d'histoire Culturelle* (Paris: A. Colin, 1993).

<sup>24</sup> Rosie Kennedy, *The Children's War: Britain 1914-1918* (Houndsmill: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Rosie Kennedy, "How Merrily the Battle Rages': Props for Make-Believe in the Edwardian Nursery Moruzi," in

this study is her discussion of how children used letters to centre their fathers back into the domestic spheres.<sup>25</sup> Examinations of children in other Allied countries such as New Zealand and America have furthered the understanding of children's wartime experiences, particularly how children experienced the First World War when they were physically distant from it.<sup>26</sup>

The studies above mostly focus on the experiences of young children, loosely defined as young people who lived in their parents or caregivers' homes under their supervision and were "too young" to date. This thesis also examines a second cohort of young people, who have not been studied as systematically by historians: young unmarried men and women. During my archival research I chose to include all collections which contained at least four months worth of correspondence between unmarried soldiers to their unmarried sisters. I chose not to use a specific age (such as twenty-five or thirty) as criteria for exclusion or inclusion. Interestingly, the collections of letters that I found were all exchanged between siblings who were under the age of twenty-five. Many of these young people were gainfully employed and dating; however, they were still very connected to their parents and siblings, especially young women, many of whom still lived in their parents' home. The young men in this study have been examined by historians such as Tim Cook and Desmond Morton, who aim to uncover the experiences of soldiers; however few historians have examined how the experiences of young soldiers differed from

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*Children's Literature and Culture of the First World War*, ed. Rosemary Ross Johnston Lissa Paul, and Emma Short, 226-238 (New York: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>25</sup> Kennedy, *The Children's War*, 25-41.

<sup>26</sup> Jeanine Graham, "Young New Zealanders and the Great War: Exploring the Impact and Legacy of the First World War, 1914-2014," *Pedagogical Historical* 44/4 (2008): 429-444; Charlotte Bennett, "'Now the war is over, we have something else to worry us': New Zealand Children's Responses to Crises, 1914-1918," *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 7/1 (2014): 15-41; Collin Ross, *Children, War and Propaganda* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011).

their older and married counterparts.<sup>27</sup> Unlike married soldiers, who had created a new home with their wife and children, these young men were strongly situated in their parents' home; mothers or fathers (and sometimes sisters) were listed as next of kin on attestation papers, soldiers almost always wrote to this household the most consistently, and they often provided their family with economic support or asked family members to send them pocket money. The experiences of this cohort can be best seen in studies which focus on underage soldiers and Michael Roper's examination of the relationship between soldiers and their mothers.<sup>28</sup> The other group of young people in this study – the soldiers' young, unmarried sisters — have been highlighted in studies about the home front that examine community and familial responses to war, but they have not garnered a great amount of attention as a unique group of young, unmarried women, with the important exception of young unmarried women who entered non-traditional workforces during the war or who served as overseas nurses. This thesis will rely on the letters exchanged between soldiers and their sisters to consider the unique experiences of these young people.

Family letters have been examined by numerous historians interested in the First World War. These letters, like the following excerpt from Raymond Bell to his sister Marjorie Bell, have been interpreted in vastly different ways by different scholars.

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<sup>27</sup> A few examples include: Tim Cook, "Anti-heroes of the Canadian Expeditionary Force," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 19/1 (2008): 171-193; Tim Cook, "Spatial Sanctuaries and Normalizing Violence: The Canadian Soldier on the Western Front during the Great War," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 49/3 (2015): 5-22; Tim Cook, *Shock Troops: Canadians fighting the Great War, 1917-1918* (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2009); Desmond Morton, *When your Number's Up*.

<sup>28</sup> Michael Roper, *The Secret Battle*; Dan Black, John Boileau, *Old Enough to Fight: Canada's Boy Soldiers in the First World War* (Toronto: James Lorimer and Company, 2013); Tim Cook, "He was determined to go': Underage Soldiers' in Canadian Expeditionary Force," *Histoire Sociale/Social History* 41/81 (2008): 41-74.



Raymond wrote this letter on September 31, 1918, while recovering from the shell wound that would eventually send him home:

As you will likely know I got mine [his injury] on the Arras front, on the second day. The first day was very easy for us till about six at night, then we hit it pretty stiff till dark. We started out the next morning again and had only gone about three hundred yards when my section had to take up a position to put up a covering fire for the rest going over. Well, old Fritz saw me firing and persuaded me not to, said he thought I'd be better off in Blighty, so here I am. It was a sniper that was so kind I think but I am not sure. It was only a single shot that was fired anyway. Glad to hear you are so well on with the hay, and so sorry to hear you have been despoiling the homes of the dear little ants.<sup>29</sup>

This letter sets up a clear juxtaposition: Raymond killed men while Marjorie killed ants. The distance between these vastly different wartime experiences have sparked a heated debate among generations of academics studying the experience of Allied soldiers. In 1975, literary scholar Paul Fussell set an influential trend by arguing that a “fissure” existed between the “patriotic, uncomprehending, fatuous, civilians” on the homefront and their war-worn relatives on the Western Front.<sup>30</sup> He argued that the physical distance between soldiers and civilians was magnified by their very different wartime experiences. This distance became so great that soldiers were isolated from their families who did not understanding the horrors they faced and therefore could not maintain meaningful communication with them. This theory was supported by Denis Winter who argues that civilians did not ask about life in the trenches and soldiers did not tell them about it.<sup>31</sup> These scholars paint a grim picture of families who could not communicate effectively across the vastly different wartime realities they experienced.

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<sup>29</sup> GA, Bell Family Fonds. Raymond Bell to Marjorie Bell, September 31, 1918.

<sup>30</sup> Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975, reprint 2003), 86.

<sup>31</sup> Denis Winter, *Death's Men: Soldiers of The Great War* (London: Penguin, 1979, reprint 2014), 1.

In contrast, letters like Raymond's have also been used by social historians to contradict Fussell's claim that soldiers "said nothing."<sup>32</sup> Raymond obviously hid the inevitable blood and gore that accompanied his injury, but he also vividly described what happened. Historians such as Joanna Bourke have used letters similar to this to demonstrate that the gulf between the homefront and warfront was not as deep as historians had previously envisioned.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Michael Roper demonstrated that British mothers and their soldier sons could communicate effectively throughout the war and, further that the emotional support mothers provided was critical to their sons' emotional survival.<sup>34</sup> Further, Rosie Kennedy demonstrated that British children and their fathers remained connected throughout the conflict.<sup>35</sup>

This historiographical divide is especially stark in the Canadian context, where scholars such as Jeff Keshen argue that censors and self-censorship led soldiers to "expunged" descriptions about war and the "emotional or heartfelt matter that was crucial in helping to keep families and particularly couples in touch."<sup>36</sup> Similarly, Dan Azoulay argues that romance between unmarried Canadian couples declined during the war because letters were a "poor substitute for personal contact."<sup>37</sup> In contrast, Tim Cook argues that "soldiers relied heavily on those at home to support and sustain them

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<sup>32</sup> Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 182.

<sup>33</sup> Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies and the Great War* (London: Reaktin Books, 1996), 21.

<sup>34</sup> Roper, *The Secret Battle*.

<sup>35</sup> Rosie Kennedy, *The Children's War: Britain 1914-1918* (Houndsmill: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

<sup>36</sup> Jeff Keshen, *Propaganda and Censorship During Canada's Great War* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1996), 154.

<sup>37</sup> Dan Azoulay, *Hearts and Minds: Canadian Romance at the Dawn of the Modern Era, 1900-1930* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press), 168-178.

emotionally.”<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Kristine Alexander demonstrated that children remained connected to their fathers throughout the war, writing letters, sending gifts, and even report cards.<sup>39</sup> Mark Humphries argues that the debate about family relationships and communication is especially contentious in the Canadian context because the homefront and warfront have been studied largely independently. He suggests that studying soldiers and their families in the same frame can help alleviate this problem.<sup>40</sup> Kristine Alexander suggests that family letters are an ideal source to use to address the disconnect between the historiography of the homefront and warfont because letters were the “bridge” between this divide in wartime.<sup>41</sup> This study will draw on the advice of both Alexander and Humphries by using letters to examine the wartime experiences of families — those at home and overseas.

This thesis will focus specifically on the experience of families who lived in rural Alberta, Saskatchewan, or Manitoba. These areas have been chosen because families in the prairie provinces had unique wartime experiences, yet historians have only begun to uncover their stories. John Herd Thompson provided an early examination in his work *Harvest of War*; however, his work does not focus on the experiences of young people on the homefront.<sup>42</sup> Recently, Robert Rutherford expanded the field by examining the

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<sup>38</sup> Cook, *Shock Troops*, 179.

<sup>39</sup> Kristine Alexander, “An Honour and a Burden.”

<sup>40</sup> Mark Humphries, “Between Commemoration and History: The Historiography of the Canadian Corps and Military Overseas,” *The Canadian Historical Review* 95/3 (2014): 384.

<sup>41</sup> Kristine Alexander, “Canadian Families and Letter Writing During the First World War,” Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Insight Grant Application, 2016.

<sup>42</sup> John Herd Thompson. *The Harvests of War: The Prairie West, 1914-1918* Thompson (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1979).

experiences of citizens living in Lethbridge, Alberta.<sup>43</sup> It is surprising that relatively little research has been done about the prairie provinces, as 25% of the Canadian Expeditionary Forces (CEF) enlisted in Alberta, Saskatchewan, or Manitoba.<sup>44</sup> Further, approximately 20% of all soldiers in the CEF listed their pre-war occupation as farmers.<sup>45</sup> This statistic is likely low, as many men farmed along with other occupations such as logging, or mining, but did not list farmer on their enlistment papers.

By examining families in wartime, this thesis will also add to discussions about paternal and sibling relationships in the early twentieth century. This insight is especially valuable, as the study of sibling relationships in the early twentieth century is a largely “untouched” area of childhood studies.<sup>46</sup> Leonore Davidoff’s recent (2011) examination of British siblings in the long nineteenth century is one of the first works to examine the sibling relationship at length. She found that siblings often had strong relationships and supported each other throughout their lives.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, letters from the First World War demonstrate that Canadian siblings supported each other emotionally, and sometimes financially, during the conflict. This examination will also add to discussion about paternal relationships in the early twentieth century, building on the work of scholars such as Julie-Marie Strange whose research aims to “correct and complicate” narratives that portrayed fathers as absent from or peripheral to family life, by

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<sup>43</sup> Robert Rutherford, *Hometown Horizons: Local Responses to Canada’s Great War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005).

<sup>44</sup> Christopher Sharpe, “Recruitment and Conscriptio (Canada),” 1914-1918, Internet Encyclopedia of the First World War, <https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net> (accessed September 2018).

<sup>45</sup> Desmond Morton, *When Your Number’s Up: The Canadian Soldier in the First World War* (Toronto: Random House of Canada, 1993), 278.

<sup>46</sup> Peter Stearns, “Challenges in the History of Childhood,” *The Journal of History of Childhood and Youth* 1/1 (2008): 36.

<sup>47</sup> Leonore Davidoff, *Thicker than Water: Siblings and their Relations, 1780-1920* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

demonstrating that working-class English Edwardian fathers had complex and intimate relationships with their children.<sup>48</sup>

### Demographics

This study examines the experiences of young people in seven nuclear families, including the Brooks, who will be examined in depth in the third chapter. The Brook children — including Gordon (age eight), Arnott (age six), Lorne (age four), and Glen (one) — were living with their parents in Craigmyle Alberta, when their father Sidney enlisted with the 113th Battalion in May, 1916 at the age of forty-five.<sup>49</sup> Six months later, baby Alice joined the family. Sidney was born in England in 1871 and settled in Morden, Manitoba, in 1891, where he met and married Isabelle McFadden, a school teacher who had been born to Irish immigrant farmers in Manitoba. In 1910, the newlyweds moved near Craigmyle, Alberta, to farm and then moved into a new home inside the town shortly before Sidney enlisted.<sup>50</sup> From inside this small house, Isabelle managed the family's farm by renting out the land, hiring farm hands, and taking care of their milk cow. She made most of the agricultural decisions without Sidney's input but kept him updated about the farm's operation including the success — but more often failure — of their grain crops.

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<sup>48</sup> Julie-Marie Strange, *Fatherhood and the British Working Class, 1865-1914* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>49</sup> At 45 Sidney was far older than most soldiers as the average age of enlistment for Canadian soldiers was 26.3. His position as a married father was also rare as 76.9% of CEF soldiers were single. Morton, *When Your Number's Up*, 279; LAC, Attestation Papers Canadian Expeditionary Force, Sidney Brook; Children's ages: GA, Brook Family Fonds.

<sup>50</sup> GA, Brook Family Fonds.

Although there are seven families in this study, there are ten soldiers, as multiple brothers served overseas in both the Bell and Redman families. Brothers Raymond and Aubrey Bell enlisted in June 1916 with the 100th Battalion and the 187th Battalion, at the age of twenty-one and eighteen, respectively.<sup>51</sup> At the time of their enlistment, they were living with their parents and four younger siblings — Marjorie (sixteen), Leslie (fifteen), Mildred (thirteen), and Marion (four) — on their homestead in Millerfield, Alberta.<sup>52</sup> Aubrey was killed on June 3, 1917, exactly one year after his enlistment. Raymond sustained a serious shell wound on his left arm but survived the war, returning to Millerfield and eventually taking over the family farm.<sup>53</sup> Approximately 100 of the letters Raymond and Aubrey sent to their family are held in the Glenbow Archives. Most of these letters were addressed to their mother or eldest sister Marjorie.

The Redman family emigrated from England to Canada in 1905.<sup>54</sup> They were living on a farm near Regina, Saskatchewan, when Eric Redman, the second oldest son, enlisted with the Cavalry unit of the 10th Battalion.<sup>55</sup> According to the 1916 census, he was born in 1895, but his attestation papers list 1894, making him at least nineteen

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<sup>51</sup> Birthdates of soldiers are listed on their attestation papers (however if soldiers lied about their age this may be inaccurate) so they have been cross referenced with census data. The 1901 census lists Aubrey's age birth year as 1897 but his attestation papers and the 1916 list his birth year as 1898 making him 18 or 19 when he enlisted. LAC, Attestation Papers Canadian Expeditionary Force, Raymond Bell; LAC, Attestation Papers Canadian Expeditionary Force, Aubrey Bell; *Census of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta*, 1916, District 33 Bow River, page 2.

<sup>52</sup> The ages for soldiers siblings were found in the census, which often only lists their age (not their birth date year), therefore their ages are only approximates; *Census of the Northwest Provinces* 1906, District 5 Brandon, Manitoba, Page: 5.

<sup>53</sup> Raymond Bell, "Millerfield and the Bell Family," in *The Grass Roots of Dorothy*, ed. Hazel Bessie Roen.

<sup>54</sup> *Census of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta*, 1916, District 27 Regina, page 3.

<sup>55</sup> LAC, Attestation Papers Canadian Expeditionary Force, Eric Redman; *Census of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta*, 1916, District 27 Regina, page 3.

years old at the time of his enlistment.<sup>56</sup> He was quickly followed by his older brother George, who joined the Fort Garry Horse Battalion in February 1915 at the age of twenty-three.<sup>57</sup> In September 1915, yet another brother, Russell, enlisted with the 46th Battalion, claiming that he was born September 12, 1897, making him exactly eighteen years and one day old. He stayed with the battalion until he was struck off strength in June 1916 because he was underage. It appears Russell was actually born in 1901, making him only fourteen years old when he enlisted.<sup>58</sup> Russell did not see front line action in the ten months before he was moved to the Young Soldiers Battalion and he remained behind the lines until the end of the war.<sup>59</sup> In February 1916, Leslie became the fourth brother to enlist, joining the 152nd Battalion at the age of nineteen.<sup>60</sup> The brothers visited each other on the Western Front and exchanged letters during the war. They also sent letters to their family at home, which included their sisters, Ivy (1893), Winifred (1897), and Constance (1898).<sup>61</sup> Many of the letters they wrote to Ivy are now held by the Canadian Letters and Images Project (CLIP).<sup>62</sup> The fond includes nineteen

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<sup>56</sup> It is unclear why the ages do not match, possible the family did not know Eric exact age or Eric lied about his age when enlisting, hoping that appearing older would heighten his chances of going overseas sooner. LAC, Attestation Papers Canadian Expeditionary Force, Eric Redman; *Census of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta*, 1916, District 27 Regina, page 3.

<sup>57</sup> LAC, Attestation Papers Canadian Expeditionary Force, George Redman; LAC, Attestation Papers Canadian Expeditionary Force, George Redman; *Census of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta*, 1916, District 27 Regina, page 3.

<sup>58</sup> LAC, Attestation Papers Canadian Expeditionary Force, Leslie Redman; LAC, Attestation Papers Canadian Expeditionary Force, Russell Redman; *Census of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta*, 1916, District 27 Regina, page 3.

<sup>59</sup> Numerous bouts of influenza appeared to have delayed his training. LAC, Attestation Papers Canadian Expeditionary Force, Russell Redman.

<sup>60</sup> LAC, Attestation Papers Canadian Expeditionary Force, George Redman; LAC, Attestation Papers Canadian Expeditionary Force, Leslie Redman; *Census of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta*, 1916, District 27 Regina, page 3.

<sup>61</sup> *Census of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta*, 1916, District 27 Regina, page 3.

<sup>62</sup> Canadian Letters and Images Project (CLIP), Canadian War Museum and Vancouver Island University, George Redman.

letters from George, three from Leslie, two from Russell, and none from Eric; however, it is clear that the brothers sent many more letters that are not in the collection. Sadly, both Leslie and George were killed during the war, as was Ivy's boyfriend.

Like the Redmans the MacKay family were farming in Saskatchewan when Gordon MacKay enlisted with the 196th Battalion at the age of twenty-two, in March 1916.<sup>63</sup> He served overseas until he received a serious leg wound in June 1917, which left him unfit for service.<sup>64</sup> Gordon was the fifth oldest child in a family of eight. He appears to have had an especially close relationship with his sisters Jessie (1898), who was five years younger than himself, and Emma, who was three years younger (1896).<sup>65</sup> CLIP holds eleven letters to Jessie and eight to Emma, who he affectionately called Kiddo, and 58 letters to other relatives, especially his mother.<sup>66</sup>

Hadden Ellis enlisted in Calgary, Alberta, in 1916 at the age of twenty-two. He sent many letters to his family, including seven long letters to his sister Lillian (1897), which are now held by CLIP.<sup>67</sup> Hadden listed his occupation as "student" on his attestation papers, but it is unclear what he was studying. He served with the Canadian Light Horse Battalion and was killed in action on September 24, 1917.<sup>68</sup> Like Hadden Ellis, George Lamb had also left his family farm; he was working as a banker in Kamsack,

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<sup>63</sup> LAC, Attestation Papers Canadian Expeditionary Force, Gordon MacKay; *Census of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta*, 1916, District 8, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, page 4.

<sup>64</sup> LAC, Attestation Papers Canadian Expeditionary Force, Gordon MacKay.

<sup>65</sup> LAC, Attestation Papers Canadian Expeditionary Force, Gordon MacKay; *Census of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta*, 1916, District 8, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, page 4.

<sup>66</sup> CLIP, Gordon MacKay.

<sup>67</sup> CLIP, Hadden Ellis.

<sup>68</sup> LAC, Attestation Papers Canadian Expeditionary Force, Hadden Ellis; LAC, Attestation Papers Canadian Expeditionary Force, Hadden Ellis; *Census of Canada*, 1901, District 2, Dundas, Ontario, Page 11.



Saskatchewan, when he enlisted with the 18th Battalion in 1916 at the age of twenty-one.<sup>69</sup> Unlike the other soldiers in this study, George was engaged when he enlisted; his fiancée Cassie McKee lived in Edmonton, Alberta, during the war. Approximately 120 of the letters that George sent to his family, including his sisters Lilian and Mildred, are now held at the Glenbow Archives.<sup>70</sup> George was killed in action in March 1918.<sup>71</sup>

The final soldier, William Bell (no relation to Aubrey and Raymond Bell), farmed with his parents in Innisfree, Alberta, before he enlisted with 151st Battalion in 1916, at the age of nineteen.<sup>72</sup> A small collection of William's letters (twenty) are held in CLIP, including six letters to his sister, Evelyn Bell (1894). It appears that William and Evelyn were the only children in the Bell family; however, the 1901 census found them living in Toronto with their parents and a seven-year-old girl named Mabel Watson, who was listed as a boarder.<sup>73</sup> William Bell was killed in the Battle of Vimy Ridge in April 1916.

Gender norms were strictly enforced in the Canadian Prairies during the early twentieth century. As children, the young women examined in this study had likely worked alongside their mothers performing numerous domestic tasks, including tending to younger children, preparing meals, cleaning, and helping with subsistence production, while brothers worked with their fathers to raise crops and livestock for market.<sup>74</sup> These

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<sup>69</sup> LAC, Attestation Papers Canadian Expeditionary Force, George Lamb; *Census of Canada*, 1901, District 8, MacDonald Manitoba, page 9.

<sup>70</sup> GA, George Lamb Fonds.

<sup>71</sup> GA, George Lamb Fonds.

<sup>72</sup> LAC, Attestation Papers Canadian Expeditionary Force, William Bell; *Census of Canada*, 1901, District 4 Toronto West, Ontario, page 6.

<sup>73</sup> *Census of Canada*, 1901, District 4 Toronto West, Ontario, page 6.

<sup>74</sup> Sandra Rollings-Magnusson, *Heavy Burdens on Small Shoulders: The Labour of Pioneer Children on the Canadian Prairies* (Edmonton: University of Alberta, 2009), 5, 136.

roles were sometimes subverted when families needed the productive labour of girls; however, they were ultimately enforced, as brothers were destined to inherit the family farms, or file for new homesteads, while sisters were expected to marry and then support their husband's endeavors.<sup>75</sup>

All the young people in this study were born in Canada with the exception of the Redman siblings, who were born in Norfolk, England, making them part of 47% of CEF soldiers who were born in Canada.<sup>76</sup> Although born in Canada, all of these families were of British ancestry. The Bells (Raymond and Aubrey), and Brooks were English, while the Lambs, Ellises, and Bells (William) were of Irish descent, and the MacKays were Scottish.<sup>77</sup> The findings of this examination are, therefore, specific to English speaking families of British descent, as soldiers and their families from minority groups likely faced a plethora of challenges that the families in this study did not. The overrepresentation of families with British ancestry in the archives examined for this thesis may suggest that families of British descent were more likely to donate their letters to archives or that their family's stories were more actively sought after by archivists. As Mark Humphries demonstrated, few historical studies have examined the

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<sup>75</sup> For the policies and motivations that were enacted to ensure that men were the genuine political and economic subjects (especially as landowners) see Sarah Carter, *Imperial Plots: Women, Land, and the Spadework of British Colonialism on the Canadian Prairies* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2016), 18.

<sup>76</sup> Morton, *When Your Number's Up*, 278.

<sup>77</sup> Raymond and Aubrey Bell Family: *Census of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta*, 1916, District 33 Bow River, page 2. Brook Family: *Census of Canada*, 1911, District 5, Red Deer, Pg. 9. Lamb Family: *Census of Canada*, 1901, District 8, MacDonald Manitoba, page 9; Ellis Family: *Census of Canada*, 1901, District 2, Dundas, Ontario, Page 11; William Bell Family: *Census of Canada*, 1901, District 4 Toronto West, Ontario, page 6. MacKay Family: *Census of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta*, 1916, District 8, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, page 4.

experience of minority soldiers and their families, at home or overseas.<sup>78</sup> A few notable examples include Timothy C. Winegard's *For King and Kanata* and Alison Norman's examination of the Six Nations of the Grand River.<sup>79</sup>

None of the soldiers or the young women examined in this study were born in the prairie provinces. Instead, they moved with their families from Eastern Canada to the West, making them part of the wave of settlers that rushed to claim land in the "last best West," which the Canadian government had opened for white settlement through the signing of numbered treaties. This migration pattern is especially interesting for this study, as it means that these young people left behind many members of their extended family in the East. Presumably, they kept in contact with these family members through letters. This suggests that these young people were already practiced at maintaining relationships "through the mail" before they were separated by the First World War. They further relied on their epistolary skills as many of them travelled throughout the prairie provinces searching for work and education before the war broke out. For example, in the weeks before Raymond Bell enlisted, he was working at his uncle's farm in Creelman, Saskatchewan, while his family was farming near Millerfield, Alberta.<sup>80</sup> Similarly, George Lamb was working in Kamsack while his family was living in Plumas,

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<sup>78</sup> Mark Humphries, "Between Commemoration and History: The Historiography of the Canadian Corps and Military Overseas," *The Canadian Historical Review* 95/3 (2014): 393-394.

<sup>79</sup> Timothy Winegard, *For King and Kanata: Canadian Indians and the First World War* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba, 2012); Alison Norman, "'In Defense of the Empire': The Six Nations of the Grand River and the Great War," in *A Sisterhood of Suffering and Service: Women and Girls of Canada and Newfoundland During the First World War*, ed. Sarah Glassford and Amy Shaw, 29-50 (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2012).

<sup>80</sup> Raymond Bell, "Millerfield and the Bell Family," 201.

Manitoba. This constant movement was not rare in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as Canadians regularly moved in search of often-elusive financial stability.<sup>81</sup>

According to the 1901 and 1916 censuses, the Ellis, Lamb, Brooks, and Redman families were Methodists, while the MacKay and William Bell families were Presbyterian, and the Raymond Bell family was Anglican. As a whole, approximately 30.9% of soldiers in the CEF were Anglican, 22.9% were Catholic, 22.1% were Presbyterian, and 13.6% Methodists. As Desmond Morton explains, the accuracy of these statistics, which are drawn from attestation papers, is questionable, as some soldiers may have been listed as Anglicans by default.<sup>82</sup> Although religion was important in Western Canada during the early twentieth-century, the young people in this study rarely mention it in their letters.

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<sup>81</sup> Rutherford, *Hometown Horizons*, 5.

<sup>82</sup> Morton, *When Your Number's Up*, 279.

## CHAPTER 1: "A Tremendous Barrier"

"Alberta Regiment Shot to Pieces in a Hail of Bullets...BARBED WIRE ENTANGLEMENTS HELD THEM IN MURDEROUS MACHINE GUN FIRE ZONE."<sup>1</sup> Striking headlines like this, printed in the *Red Deer News* on Oct 19, 1916, crossed the Atlantic Ocean at incredible speeds through undersea and above ground cables, bringing news from the Western Front to the Canadian Prairies in anywhere from a few hours to one week.<sup>2</sup> This technology allowed soldiers' families to create a narrative of the war's changing events, which was only a few days behind the actual conflict. This narrative was not always accurate however, and changed quickly as families rushed to the local newspaper offices to read the latest bulletins and listened eagerly to war rumours that ripped through the community.

Canadian families also received a steady stream of letters written by their relatives serving on the Western Front. These letters strung together a narrative of their loved ones' daily experiences, health, and emotional states. However, this information was delayed by at least three weeks, as letters had to cross the Atlantic by ship then travel to the Prairies by train. These differing speeds of communication created two war narratives for homefront families: first, a quickly changing narrative of the war's general progress; and second, a chronicle of their loved ones' daily experiences, which was eternally three weeks behind. These two speeds of communication posed great challenges for wartime families, especially when families read about deadly battles in newspapers but had to wait weeks to receive the letters their loved

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<sup>1</sup> "Alberta Regiment Shot to Pieces in a Hail of Bullets," *Red Deer News* (October 18, 1916), 7. The article describes events that took place at the Somme on October 12, 1916.

<sup>2</sup> David Gallant, "Armageddon: Alberta Newspapers and the Outbreak of the Great War, 1914," *The Frontier of Patriotism: Alberta and the First World War*, ed. Adriana A. Davies and Jeff Keshen, 263-278 (Calgary: University of Calgary, 2016), 265.

one's had written during or shortly after the conflict. This feeling is exemplified by Mrs. Lamb, who told her son, "I have been thinking a great deal about you lately, as I feel sure you took part in the Hill 70 battle, I see in the papers the Canadians won golden laurels for their bravery and undaunted courage, it must have been a terrible battle."<sup>3</sup> This chapter will examine how the communication technologies available to the families of Canadian soldiers shaped their experience of distance and how they used these numerous strategies to bridge this distance.

#### Fast Communication: Newspapers, rumours, and telegrams

Newspapers brought information into Canadian homes at impressive speeds, but the information they carried was often contradictory. This created a challenge for homefront families as they tried to piece together an understanding of what was happening overseas. For example, on March 25, 1918, a Medicine Hat newspaper ran two bulletins, the first of which was written in London on March 25. It read: "British retiring in excellent order... Only 5,000 additional prisoners."<sup>4</sup> While, the headline below it, received from Berlin on March 25 read: "Huns claim capture of Baupume and Hesle, with total of 45,000 prisoners and guns taken." Headlines like this would undoubtedly cause stress for families as they worked to piece together information about the war and their loved one's safety.

British historians Colin Lovelace and Alice Marquis argue that homefront families could not gain an accurate understanding of the war or soldiers' day-to-day lives from newspapers because stringent censorship laws and journalists' desire to self-censor resulted in papers filled

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<sup>3</sup> GA, George Lamb Fonds. Mary Lamb to George Lamb, August 24, 1917.

<sup>4</sup> "British retiring in excellent order. Shown by claim of Berlin. Only 5,000 additional prisoners," *Medicine Hat News* (March 25, 1918), 1; "Huns claim capture of Bapaume and Hesle, with total of 45,000 prisoners and guns taken," *Medicine Hat News* (March 25, 1918), 1.

with pro-war propaganda.<sup>5</sup> In the Canadian context, historian Jeff Keshen argues that the Chief Press Censor's office successfully censored Canadian papers after its establishment in June 1916, meaning that little reliable information could be found in newspapers.<sup>6</sup> However, British historian Helen McCartney argues that "these historians have not examined in depth the content of the newspapers they discuss," choosing instead to examine the laws of censorship but not how the "laws they describe were interpreted by editors and affected articles appearing in print."<sup>7</sup> She studied local newspapers that reported the movements of the Liverpool Territorials, and concluded that civilians reading these papers were actually well informed about the war and they therefore "cannot be reconciled with the 'bewildered' ignorant civilians other historians have depicted."<sup>8</sup> Newspapers published in the Canadian Prairies were often sensationalized and tried to boost morale by focusing on victories and heroic acts; however these papers still communicated the steep loss of life in the war and its general progression.

Canadian soldiers knew that their families were consistently reading newspapers at home. Raymond Bell exemplified this by telling his sister that he was in the Battle of Amiens, noting, "I suppose you have read all about it in the papers, so no need of me telling you."<sup>9</sup> Soldiers strategically used Canadian newspapers to pass information onto their homefront families. For example, Raymond Bell told his mother that he was not

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<sup>5</sup> Colin Lovelace, "British Press Censorship during the First World War," in *Newspaper History: From the 17<sup>th</sup> Century to the Present Day*, ed. George Boyce, James Curran, and Pauline Wingate, 307-319 (Constable: London. 1978); Alice Marquis, "Words as Weapons," *Journal of Contemporary History* 13 (1978), 476-80.

<sup>6</sup> Jeff Keshen, *Propaganda and Censorship During Canada's Great War* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1996), 65-95.

<sup>7</sup> Helen McCartney, *Citizen Soldiers: The Liverpool Territorials in the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 104.

<sup>8</sup> McCartney, *Citizen Soldiers*, 110.

<sup>9</sup> GA, Bell Family Fonds. Raymond Bell to Marjorie Bell, September 31, 1918.

allowed to tell her “where we landed nor the name of the vessel,” however she “will doubtless see in the papers what battalions came over with us.”<sup>10</sup> Knowing which battalions landed with her son would allow Mrs. Bell to ask community members if they knew where any of those battalions were stationed, giving her a better idea of where her son was. George Lamb also tried to use newspapers to tell his family where he was located: “If you ever see a picture in a Canadian paper with a lot of trophies in and a tree which resembles an umbrella, you can know it is where we are only our camp is half a mile from it.”<sup>11</sup>

Families on the Canadian Prairies also received information — and misinformation — at very quick speeds from war rumours that spread across the country. For example, on March 25, 1918 the *Edmonton Bulletin* reported that a rumour had circulated throughout the city saying that Canadian troops captured up to 500,000 German soldiers. In response to this rumour and ongoing reports about Germans capturing Canadian soldiers, families in the area made 5,000 “anxious” phone calls to the *Bulletin* office in search of the latest war news.<sup>12</sup> Adrienne Stone from Toronto (b. 1898) recalled the stress that wartime rumours like this caused (in a 1978 oral history), in which she explained that a single rumour:

...would put the place into a hysteria over a weekend. Say that the troops had left, that they were probably on the ocean, and [a] rumour would come that there was a Canadian troop ship down in mid-Atlantic. Well, if that had happened over a weekend, everybody was just unnerved by the end of the week!<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> GA, Bell Family Fonds. Aubrey Bell to Emma Bell, September 28, 1916.

<sup>11</sup> GA, George Lamb to Mary Lamb, May 27, 1917.

<sup>12</sup> “Thousands of People Phone in for News: All day long anxious inquires pour in to the Bulletin,” *Edmonton Bulletin* (March 25, 1918).

<sup>13</sup> Adrienne Stone, in *The Great War and Canadian Society: An Oral History*, ed. Daphne Read (New Hogtown Press: Toronto, 1979), 192.



Like war news printed in papers, war rumours arrived quickly and changed often, creating a very stressful environment for homefront families who were constantly trying to assess the danger or safety that their loved ones' faced.

Telegrams, which military officials sent to families when soldiers were killed or hospitalized, were the final "fast" form of communication that carried information to families on the Canadian Prairies. Soldiers and their homefront families could also buy telegrams to send especially important information; however, this pricey form of communication was rarely used by the families in this study. Ideally, the absence of a telegram should have reassured families that their loved ones were safe; however, official military telegrams often took weeks to reach anxious families, especially after large chaotic battles. This reality is clearly demonstrated in the case of the Bell family, who did not receive a cable telling them that Aubrey Bell was missing in action until seventeen days after his disappearance or that Raymond Bell was injured until twelve days after his wounding.<sup>14</sup> Further, homefront families were also anxious to know if their loved ones had received minor wounds, not just injuries large enough to require hospitalization, and therefore an official telegram.

Newspapers, rumours, and telegrams were far from perfect forms of communication and created many hardships for families. These hardships were further complicated by the temporal distance between these fast forms of communication and letters. The hardships that the varying speeds of communication created are illustrated

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<sup>14</sup> GA, Raymond Bell to Marjorie Bell, Nov. 3, 1918.

in the letters sent between Isabelle and Sidney Brook when their seven-year-old son Arnott fell ill in October 1917. Isabelle wrote weekly letters to Sidney, which allowed him to create a flowing and accurate narrative of his family's homefront life, but this narrative was constantly three weeks behind reality. On approximately October 24, 1917, Sidney's chronological narrative was interrupted by a telegram that had travelled from Alberta to England (where he was recovering from a shell wound) in only a couple of days. The telegram read, "Arnott died today, Come home, Isabelle."<sup>15</sup> When this telegram broke into Sidney's reality he had no idea how his son had died. In the coming months, he slowly received the letters that Isabelle wrote when Arnott was sick. The letters arrived every few days in loosely chronological order, so Sidney was forced to slowly read the letters about Arnott's declining health while already knowing that he would die. Isabelle's descriptions of her love for Arnott likely made this time even more heartbreaking: "Arnott's our all round man, and he does most anything and everything," she wrote on October 16, "Don't know what we'd ever do without him."<sup>16</sup> On approximately November 14, Sidney finally received the first letter Isabelle wrote after Arnott's death: "It seems so awful that it should have robbed us of our wee man." Further she explained, "Gordon & Arnott were like a little team - now I've only one left."<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, Isabelle was forced to wait for three weeks after her son's death until she received the letter that Sidney wrote on the day he found out: "It is hard to

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<sup>15</sup> GA, Brook Family Fonds. GA, Sidney Brook to Isabelle Brook, October 30, 1917. Sidney rewrote the telegram in his letter, explaining: "that cable message was plainly before me, - "Arnott died today, Come home, Isabelle". Those two sentences are burned into my mind."

<sup>16</sup> GA, Brook Family Fonds. GA, Isabelle Brook to Sidney Brook, October 16, 1917.

<sup>17</sup> GA, Isabelle Brook to Sidney Brook, October 29, 1917.

realize that our little Arnott is gone, somehow the world seems different.” He continued from his hospital in England: “I am very glad that I am not in France, had such news reached me whilst there I’m afraid I’d have lost my mind - as it is I feel something like a wild animal in a cage - wanting to break loose and return home and cannot!”<sup>18</sup>

Situations like this starkly illustrate how the communication tools, which delivered information at varying speeds, shaped family’s wartime experiences, often negatively. It is not hard to assume that that distance between the homefront and Europe felt even further away for Sidney during this period. After receiving the telegram from Craigmyle, he was forced to wait for Isabelle’s letters. As he waited, he knew life continued in Craigmyle; he likely wondered when the funeral was taking place, worried that his other children were also sick, and imagined how his son had died. But he could not know any of this information until the letters Isabelle wrote finished their long journey across Canada, the Atlantic Ocean, and finally military postal system, to reach him in his hospital bed in England.

The temporal distance between families like the Brooks was further complicated when letters were lost or delayed. This occurred frequently, as postal service workers sorted thousands of letters by hand and connected them with soldiers who were constantly moving across the Western Front. Studies of the Australian postal system (which was identical to the Canadian system)<sup>19</sup> suggest that as many as 57 percent of

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<sup>18</sup> GA, Sidney Brook to Isabelle Brook, October 29, 1917.

<sup>19</sup> Keshen, *Censorship and Propaganda*, 158.

letters and 63 percent of parcels were redirected or lost during the war.<sup>20</sup> These delays meant that letters and the information they carried often arrived in a haphazard and nonconsecutive order. Gordon MacKay, a soldier serving on the Western Front, described the frustration this caused when he explained that:

I got lots of news though some of it was very disconnected, probably owing to some letter failing to reach me as yet. Dad said something about James Bros. building a brick building where the poolroom was burned down again. Now I heard nothing of the fire & I'm sure some of you must have written about it. Then Mother you said that Dad had received \$3 per day while he was in Regina. Now I never even new he was in Regina.<sup>21</sup>

A lost or delayed letter also brought stress to homefront families, as they often interpreted the silence a sign that their loved one had been killed or injured.<sup>22</sup> These fears were not unfounded as seven out of ten combat soldiers were killed or injured during the war.<sup>23</sup> Isabelle Brook described the stress her family experienced when an anticipated letter did not arrive, telling her husband: "There seems to be an unrestful, strained anxious feeling prevalent to-night, and all connected with the war region, and loved ones so far away from us."<sup>24</sup>

To add even more complexity, soldiers on the warfront did not always know where their families on the homefront were. For example, Raymond Bell's mother and youngest siblings moved from their homestead in Millerfield to Calgary for the cold winter months; his sister Marjorie sometimes joined them but not always; and his father

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<sup>20</sup> Kevin Fewster, "Expression and Suppression: Aspects of Military Censorship in Australia During World War I," Unpublished Ph. D. Thesis, University of New South Wales, 1980. As cited in Keshen, *Censorship and Propaganda*, 158.

<sup>21</sup> CLIP, Gordon MacKay Fonds. Gordon John and Georgie MacKay, July 18, 1917.

<sup>22</sup> Lyon, *The Writing Culture of Ordinary People*, 35-39.

<sup>23</sup> Tim Cook, *Shock Troops: Canadians fighting the Great War, 1917-1918* (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2009), 613.

<sup>24</sup>GA, Isabelle Brook to Sidney Brook, December 7, 1916.

generally remained at Millerfield but sometimes travelled for seasonal work. This made it difficult for Raymond to judge where he should address his letters. During transitional periods, he was often forced to guess, telling Marjorie: "I suppose by the time you get this you will be out on the farm again so I am going to address it there."<sup>25</sup>

The challenges associated with epistolary communication clearly brought hardship to many families. It is also important to note the joy letters brought. Letters were not only vessels carrying information but also intimate objects created by the hands of loved ones that could be "touched, held, smelled ... stored away, hidden and destroyed."<sup>26</sup> Wartime letters were also highly personalized, written in a loved one's voice, with their unique cursive and with an individualized signature. Communicating with this tool created unique and highly emotional experiences for many families. Like many soldiers, Sidney Brook treasured the letters his children sent by placing them in his "left breast pocket" along with his testament. Homefront families also treasured letters and painstakingly saved these fragile pieces of paper for generations.<sup>27</sup> Further, Hanna Martha suggests that letter writing may have helped families express their emotions more clearly. She draws on cognitive sciences to suggest that people can often express and form more complex thoughts on paper than they can verbally, in the same way people can often solve more complex math problems on paper than in their minds.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> GA, Raymond Bell to Marjorie Bell, no date.

<sup>26</sup> David Barton and Nigel Hall, "Introduction," *Letter Writing as a Social Practice*, ed. David Barton and Nigel Hall, 1-14 (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 2000), 8.

<sup>27</sup> For a further examination of letters as treasured objects see: David Gerber, *Authors of Their Lives: The personal correspondence of British immigrants to North America in the nineteenth century* (New York & London: NYU Press, 2005), 1-31.

<sup>28</sup> Martha Hanna, *Your Death Would Be Mine: Paul and Marie Pireaud in the Great War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 299.

Perhaps communicating through this medium therefore strengthened people's bonds, as they were forced to share their thoughts on paper and therefore expressed them in more complex ways.

The challenges families faced as they tried to put communication tools to work and the distance between the homefront and warfront were further exaggerated by wartime censorship. Soldiers were officially forbidden from sharing any information that could aid the enemy if their letters were intercepted. This included details about their locations and movements, as well as descriptions of morale, the effects of enemy fire, and criticism of the allied war effort. Some soldiers also chose to "self-censor" their letters by leaving out detailed descriptions of war that would worry their families. Although some military historians have suggested that this self-censorship led to a "chasm of incomprehension," recent scholars have demonstrated that this gap is not as large as previously suspected.<sup>29</sup> For instance, Helen McCartney demonstrated that even when soldiers did provide "sanitized descriptions" of war in an attempt to protect their loved ones living in Liverpool, their families still gained a detailed understanding of war by hearing news from community members and reading the letters of other soldiers.<sup>30</sup>

Although communities in the rural prairies were more distant from the Front and far less densely populated than those in England, these smaller communities still created social networks through which their members shared war letters. For instance, the Brook family who lived in the small village of Craigmyle had a strong communication

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<sup>29</sup> Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975, reprint 2003), 183.

<sup>30</sup> McCartney, *Citizen Soldiers*, 94-95.

network through which Isabelle often read the letters that her neighbours received and shared some of her letters with them. Isabelle highlighted her network in a letter to Sidney explaining: “Yesterday I got the first intimation of your being on the firing line, and you scarcely made it clear that you were really in the trenches, but Farrow’s had a letter too from J.B.M. with full details, which then left no doubt in my mind.”<sup>31</sup> Isabelle’s friend and neighbour, Mrs. Lavers also used Isabelle and Sidney as avenues to communicate with her own husband, who did not write as often as Sidney did. She asked Isabelle to write to Sidney on her behalf and ask him to find her husband on the Western Front and “shame him- - shame him” for not writing to her often enough.<sup>32</sup> A similarly complex communication network, which involved family members on the homefront and warfront, is exemplified in George Redman’s letter to his sister Ivy. Specifically, George, who was stationed in France, wrote to his sister in Saskatchewan telling her: “I recieved<sup>33</sup> a letter from Auntie the other day she had heard from Russell and he was at the base I will give you his address.”<sup>34</sup> In other words, after Russell arrived in France, he gave his new address to his aunt (who lived in England), who then gave the address to George, who passed on the information to his sister Ivy, who likely shared it with her parents on the homefront.

As these examples demonstrate, soldiers were active participants in communication networks that bridged the Atlantic, providing information about the

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<sup>31</sup> GA, Isabelle Brook to Sidney Book, January 5, 1917.

<sup>32</sup> GA, Isabelle Brook quotes Mrs. Lavers in her letter. GA, Isabelle Brook to Sidney Brook, Wed. Nov. 29, 1916.

<sup>33</sup> All of the letters in this study have been transcribed exactly as they were written, including spelling and grammar mistakes.

<sup>34</sup> CLIP, George Redman Fonds. George Redman to Ivy Redman, March 4, 1917.

health and wellbeing of soldiers from their communities who they saw while overseas.

For instance, Gordon MacKay provided his sister with an update about many of the local men he knew:

Harold Hoskins was killed this last time & Fred King wounded. Fred was only in France a few hours when he got hit in the arm. Bobby Leech was buried a few times but always came to the surface again... Smith is O.K. so far & so is Percy Hoskins. The Shirwoods are not in it yet. Ed Lochard is in this Batt & so was Lou but he was wounded. I saw Ed today.<sup>35</sup>

Similarly, the Redman brothers often told their sister Ivy when they saw each other at the front, and provided her with descriptions of each other's health. Specifically, Leslie told her that Eric was "quite well & so fat as butter," while her oldest brother George informed her that Leslie was "ugly fat but if he goes to France that will soon come off."<sup>36</sup>

By passing on information like this, soldiers were actively engaging in their community's communication networks. Their compliance in this network suggests that they understood and empathized with civilians' desire for information.

Field service postcards can also be read as further evidence that soldiers empathized with their family's stress and desire for information. Field service postcards were small cards with phrases printed on them, including "I am quite well," "I have been admitted into hospital," "I have received your letter," or "I have received no letter from you." Soldiers crossed out the phrases that didn't apply to them and then sent the card. This process was much faster and easier than writing a letter, which required a great amount of time, light, and paper that was not always available to soldiers in the front

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<sup>35</sup> Gordon MacKay to Jessie, May 12, 1917.

<sup>36</sup> CLIP, Leslie Redman Fond, Leslie Redman to Ivy Redman, December 13, 1916; CLIP, George Redman Fond, George Redman to Ivy Redman, Jan 19, 1917.



lines. Soldiers were not allowed to write any extra information on the cards; therefore, the cards were a simple, quick way for soldiers to demonstrate to their loved ones that they were alive and well. Paul Fussell argues that these postcards exemplify soldiers' disillusionment with their families because soldiers used the cards when they were "too tired to transcribe the clichés of the conventional phlegmatic letter."<sup>37</sup> In contrast, the contextualization above suggests that soldiers empathized with their family's stress and wanted to ease it by sending field service cards, which reassured their families that they were in good health.

### The Bell Family

The many ways that families put communication tools to work — including letters, newspapers, and community networks — and the ways these tools affected their wartime experiences — are further demonstrated in the letters exchanged between Raymond Bell, who was serving in France with the 100<sup>th</sup> Battalion, and his seventeen-year-old sister Marjorie after their brother Aubrey was reported missing. A telegram arrived at the local post office on June 20, 1917 telling the Bell family that Aubrey had been reported "Missing in Action" on June 3.<sup>38</sup> After receiving this dreaded telegram, Raymond and his mother reached out to their networks by writing to men at the front who might have known what happened to Aubrey, as well as to the Red Cross and Aubrey's commanding officer. On August 12, a soldier from Aubrey's battalion wrote to the family saying he saw Aubrey killed on June 3, the morning he was reported

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<sup>37</sup> Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 183.

<sup>38</sup> GA, Bell Family Fonds. Director of Records 1055 to Thomas Bell, Telegram, June 20, 1917.

missing. This letter probably reached the family about three weeks later, meaning they finally received confirmation of Aubrey's death nearly three months after he was killed.

During this period of confusion, Aubrey's family worked to piece together numerous sources of information to understand what happened. Seventeen-year-old Marjorie played an important role in this endeavor, as she constantly communicated with her brother Raymond and exchanged information with her other family members. It is also evident that she searched through newspapers printed shortly after June 3 to look for hints about where Aubrey's battalion may have been and if it was possible that he was taken prisoner, instead of killed. After finding information in local papers that she thought provided clues to where Aubrey's battalion might have been, she sent two newspaper clippings to Raymond suggesting that her research was accurate.<sup>39</sup>

Aubrey's death clearly created an immense distance between him and Marjorie. However, she continued trying to bridge this divide. Like many civilians in the Great War, including Rudyard Kipling, Marjorie turned her attention to the mystical realm. In December 1917, she asked a Ouija board about Aubrey and told Raymond that the board said he was a prisoner. With hopeful doubt, Raymond replied, "I hardly know what to think. If he is [a prisoner], he would surely have communicated with us long before this, but will hope the little board is right."<sup>40</sup> The popularity of spiritualism speaks to the hardship these families faced and hints at how far families ventured in their often unending search for information and communication. Aubrey's death appears to have

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<sup>39</sup> GA, Raymond Bell to Mother, July 23, 1917; Raymond Bell to Marjorie, August 6, 1917.

<sup>40</sup> GA, Raymond Bell to Marjorie Bell, December 29, 1917.

been a distance that the Bell family could not bridge. In a letter from January 11, 1918, Raymond doubted the effectiveness of the Ouija board, telling Marjorie: “As for that Ouija board of yours, I think the darned thing is all a fake. How in thunderation is a chunk of wood going to talk to you I would like to know.”<sup>41</sup>

Marjorie's search for information is also important because it demonstrates that she was not a passive spectator during this stressful period. Instead, like her mother and father, she actively searched for information and communicated with family members at home and overseas. Many of the other sisters in this study, who will be examined further in the following chapter, also played key roles in their family's chain of communication. For example, Lillian Ellis wrote to her older siblings telling them Hadden had been killed, and George Redman asked his sister Ivy to inform their shared friend if he was killed.<sup>42</sup> Family letters also demonstrate that many young women, like Marjorie, searched through newspapers for information about progress and loss on the front lines. For instance, George Lamb's eighteen-year-old sister, Mildred, was the first family member to find out he had been gassed after seeing his name appear in the causality list in the newspaper.<sup>43</sup>

The numerous communication tools available to families like the Bells shaped their wartime experiences in multiple ways. In particular, the quick speed of newspapers, telegrams, and war rumors, compared to the slow speed of letters added chaos and confusion to an already stressful situation. Although this created great

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<sup>41</sup> GA, Raymond Bell to Marjorie Bell, January 11, 1918.

<sup>42</sup> R. Ellis Iroquois to “Bro Sister One & all,” October 10, 1917. Iroquois begins his letter by saying: “We received Lillie's letter telling us about Hadden's death.”; George Redman to Ivy Redman, June 15, 1916.

<sup>43</sup> GA, Mary Lamb to George Lamb, Sept 22, 1917.

challenges, families successfully employed numerous methods and drew on complex communication networks to communicate effectively. The following two chapters will expand this study by examining the many strategies families used to maintain their bonds of love and friendship in the face of the great distance created by the First World War.

## CHAPTER 2: “My dear Sis”<sup>1</sup>

In early January 1915, nineteen-year-old Ivy Redman wrote to her brother George telling him that she had turned down a man’s proposal at a local Christmas party. George eagerly responded asking her to: “write and tell me [who it was,] as I am anxious.” In the interim, he wagered a guess: “I cannot imagine who it would be unless it was Willie and if he had enough gall I hope you laughed in his face.”<sup>2</sup> It is unclear why Ivy and George were separated when this letter was written; perhaps George was away from the family farm for temporary work, or maybe Ivy had left to begin her nursing education. Regardless, the letter demonstrates that George and Ivy could communicate across distance when they were temporarily separated during peacetime and they shared stories about their youthful adventures with each other. These skills would become very valuable when George travelled to Europe in 1916, creating an immense physical distance between the siblings.

All of the young women examined in this chapter, including Ivy, remained on the homefront during the war, while their brother(s) served on the Western Front. Most of them engaged in education or paid labour during the war, such as nursing and teaching, which were considered acceptable for unmarried women in the early twentieth century. Specifically, Emma MacKay, Lillian Ellis, and Mildred Lamb were teaching school, and Ivy Redman finished high school and then began training to become a nurse. In contrast

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<sup>1</sup> George Redman began nearly all of his letters to Ivy with “My dear Sis” and signed off as “Your Bro, G. H. Redman.” CLIP, George Redman Fond.

<sup>2</sup> CLIP, George Redman to Ivy Redman, January 24, 1915.

Eveline Bell worked at a telephone office and Jessie Mackay attended high school until 1917 when she quit to work in a local store with her mother. Both of these jobs may not have been as readily available to women during the pre-war period. It appears that many of these young women, like Jessie MacKay, were providing financial support to their parents.<sup>3</sup> The final young woman highlighted in this study, Marjorie Bell, spent the war years working on her family's homestead. Raymond Bell commended Marjorie's work in the *Dorothy Community Memory Book* created in 1971, writing that Marjorie was "a husky girl" and was called upon to "replace" her brothers during the war.<sup>4</sup> Raymond's wartime letters outline some of the tasks Marjorie was responsible for, such as tending to horses and cattle, and helping plant and harvest crops.<sup>5</sup> Clearly these young women had wartime experiences which differed greatly from their brothers who served overseas; and these differing wartime experiences created a distance between siblings. The numerous strategies they used to speak across this distance, will be the focus of this chapter.

Scholars like Paul Fussell and Jeff Keshen argue that soldiers and their families could not communicate across these vastly distant wartime experiences. They conclude that soldiers wrote "phlegmatic" letters, in which they tried to "fill the page by saying nothing" and used "the maximum number of clichés."<sup>6</sup> These historians have conceptualized soldiers' letters as "empty" because they disregard discussions which

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<sup>3</sup> CLIP, Gordon Mackay Fonds. Gordon MacKay to Jessie MacKay, Jan 5, 1917.

<sup>4</sup> Raymond Bell, "Millerfield and the Bell Family," in *The Grass Roots of Dorothy, 1895-1970*, ed. Hazel Roen (Dorothy Community, 1971), 192-211.

<sup>5</sup> GA, Bell Family Fonds. Raymond Bell to Marjorie Bell; October 14, 1916, Nov. 13, 1916, Nov. 15, 1916.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975; reprint 2000), 181-182.

were not directly related to combat as unimportant or meaningless. This dismissal is clearly demonstrated by Canadian historian Jeff Keshen, who argues that soldiers “fill[ed] their letters” by writing about “any tidbit of information received from home” to avoid talking about the war.<sup>7</sup> This chapter will contradict these dismissals by closely examining and conceptualizing the many “tidbits” that soldiers discussed, such as dating, gossiping, and life on the homefront, as strategies that soldiers used to speak across difference, not fluff used to “fill the page.”

While siblings were separated, soldiers like George faced many moments of horror and terror, as they climbed out of their trenches to “pay Fritz a little visit,” running past dead and dying comrades, through a rain of bullets and exploding shells.<sup>8</sup> However, soldiers spent most of their time waiting; waiting for the cover of night, for distant artillery fire, and of course waiting for letters, rum, rest, and a much-desired change from monotonous routines and tasks. During these periods of waiting, soldiers filled their time with a distinctive low brow culture, which included dark and dirty humour, drinking, swearing, smoking, and gambling. This masculine culture was similar to the cultures found in the bunkhouses which some men had occupied in their civilians lives, at mining, lodging, and construction camps (jobs that young men sometimes did seasonally along in addition to farming).<sup>9</sup> Historian Tim Cook argues that trench culture and its characteristic dark humour often excluded civilians because “much of the soldiers’ culture was not easily shared with or understood by outsiders.” He further

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<sup>7</sup> Jeff Keshen, *Propaganda and Censorship During Canada's Great War* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1996), 157.

<sup>8</sup> CLIP, William Bell Fonds. William Bell to Evelin Bell, February 15, 1917.

<sup>9</sup> Desmond Morton, *When Your Number's Up*, 73.

argues that “this, of course, was part of its appeal.”<sup>10</sup> Interpretations like this build on the idea that a “chasm of incomprehension” existed between soldiers and their families on the homefront, and that soldier desired this isolation from civilian life.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, this masculine, low brow humour did not mesh with the ideal youth cultures *prescribed* to young women on the homefront. As active participants in the colonial dream to settle the Canadian Prairies, young white women were supposed to be kind, hardworking, and chaste members of society who would help colonize the nation by creating “good” white families, qualities that clearly did not align with the dark humour and risky behaviour associated with trench culture.<sup>12</sup> However, trench culture did not create a “chasm of incomprehension” which soldiers and their civilian sisters could not cross, instead soldiers were excited to share many aspects of their new culture, and siblings drew on shared experiences of youth to speak across the distance created by their differing wartime experiences.<sup>13</sup>

One aspect of trench culture that brothers often shared, was their participation in the “laddish behaviour” of pranking. These pranks pushed back against strict military authority with a “masculine spirit of teasing,” and are closely associated with trench culture.<sup>14</sup> Nineteen-year-old Aubrey Bell was clearly excited to share this aspect of his new culture with his seventeen-year-old sister, Marjorie. He explained to her that the

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<sup>10</sup> Tim Cook, “Anti-heroes of the Canadian Expeditionary Force,” *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 19/1 (2008): 173-174.

<sup>11</sup> Fussell, *Great War and Modern Memory*, 183.

<sup>12</sup> Sarah Carter, *Imperial Plots: Women, Land, and the Spadework of British Colonialism on the Canadian Prairies* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2016), 9-10.

<sup>13</sup> Fussell, *Great War and Modern Memory*, 183.

<sup>14</sup> Tim Cook, “‘I will meet the world with a smile and a joke’: Canadian soldiers’ humour in the Great War,” *Canadian Military History* 22/2 (2013): 7.



men in his section pranked their “cranky old English Corporal” by hiding two men in one cot after lights out. Their corporal was therefore forced to feel around the cots looking for one with two men hidden in it, but as Aubrey explained, “they hid and we all started to laugh at him.”<sup>15</sup> In return, Marjorie told Aubrey about the youthful pranks she engaged in on the homefront, including “some stunt” she “pulled on poor old Ready with the axe.”<sup>16</sup>

The masculine culture existing between soldiers on the Western Front was also marked by an idealization and normalization of violence, and many soldiers shared this aspect of trench culture with their sisters. After serving in the army for just over a year, twenty-year-old William Bell told his sister that most of the German prisoners were “quite happy” when they were captured, some “even start to sing,” making it “a shame to have to kill them.”<sup>17</sup> In this statement William uses a light-hearted tone to describe the gruesome act of killing soldiers who are trying to surrender. This offhanded description demonstrates an especially nonchalant understanding of violence, as it was forbidden by international law to kill surrendering soldiers. George Lamb also spoke light-heartedly about Allied soldiers performing gruesome acts, explaining that if soldiers bombing an enemy trench came across Germans who were “just partially knocked out,” they “[stuck] the bayonet through him and carried on.”<sup>18</sup> Both excerpts clearly demonstrate that soldiers were unafraid to share violent stories with their sisters.

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<sup>15</sup> GA, Bell Family Fonds. Aubrey Bell to Marjorie Bell, February 1917.

<sup>16</sup> GA, Raymond Bell to Marjorie Bell, May 24.

<sup>17</sup> CLIP, William Bell to Evelin Bell, March 3, 1917.

<sup>18</sup> GA, Lamb Family Fonds. George Lamb to Lillian Lamb, February 20, 1917.

Some soldiers also shared stories about the violence that occurred beyond the battlefield. George Lamb regularly wrote letters to his mother, which she shared with the other members in her household, including his sister, Mildred. In one such letter, he told his family about a violent rampage he had participated in while training in Kamsack, Saskatchewan. The men in his battalion received word that one of their comrades had been arrested for drinking in a stable, so twenty-five men ran out to meet the police officer and “tapped the detective on the shoulder, yelling ‘halt! you sun -----,” then they followed the officer to the police station and made the sergeant release their comrade. After this encounter, the group smashed approximately \$600 worth of windows. George further explained that the men in his battalion who slept through this excitement were “sore because they had not participated and were eager for more fun,” so they found another detective, “dragged him across the street, punching and kicking him,” and hit him with a glass bottle. The fight ended when the soldiers’ officers told the men they had “done enough to him.”<sup>19</sup> Sharing this story with his family, suggests that George was not afraid they would judge him or his comrades harshly, suggesting that the “chasm” between army and civilian life was bridged by shared cultures of violent masculinity and youthful disobedience.

Of course, not all soldiers embraced this masculine culture flagged by violence, pranking, and pushing social boundaries. For instance, Gordon MacKay, who had worked as a “section foreman” until he enlisted with the 46th Canadian Infantry in 1916, largely abstained from these activities, even referring to himself as a “teetotaler” because he

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<sup>19</sup> GA, George Lamb to Mary Lamb, May 27, 1916.

did not take the rum ration or engage in relationships with more than one woman.<sup>20</sup>

Gordon was also careful to tell his mother that he did not gamble with the other men and even gave up his seat at the nightly bridge table when it developed into a penny-a-point game.<sup>21</sup> When he did engage in “low brow” trench culture, he chose to share the tale with his younger sister, Jessie. Gordon explained that the soldiers in his battalion were gambling by throwing pennies into a bowl. If a man could land the penny in the bowl, he was paid six pence by the manager, but the manager took all the pennies that missed. Gordon noticed that by bouncing the penny into the dish instead of tossing it, the penny would not have the force to bounce out again. With this knowledge, he successfully landed his first shot in the bowl, causing the other men to tease him, saying, “I thought he did not gamble.” Gordon proudly told his sister, “and neither I do, I says, & I walked away *without* my sixpence. I was just demonstrating don't you know.”<sup>22</sup>

Although gambling, and then refusing to collect the winnings, is not an evening that most soldiers would consider scandalous it was out of character for Gordon. Sharing such a tale with his sister, especially in a sly and mischievous tone, speaks to their intimate relationship and youthful companionship. He also appears to have chosen his sister as the only recipient of this story, as he did not write about it in his letters to his mother, further exemplifying the unique relationship he and his sister shared.

Military historians studying trench culture often rely on evidence drawn from family letters, like those examined above, to reconstruct the masculine culture that

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<sup>20</sup> CLIP, Gordon MacKay to Jessie MacKay, May 17, 1917 or 1918.

<sup>21</sup> CLIP, Gordon MacKay to Georgie MacKay, December 23, 1916.

<sup>22</sup> CLIP, Gordon MacKay to Jessie MacKay, January 5, 1917. Punctuation added for clarity

thrived among Canadian men on the Western Front. This reliance on family letters demonstrates how common it was for soldiers to share these types of descriptions with their families. It is therefore surprising that these studies which draw so heavily on family letters often conclude that soldiers were isolated from their families because they underwent a “masculine transformation” by engaging in a culture of swearing, drinking, and normalizing violence “distancing [them] from civilian life.”<sup>23</sup> Of course this wartime culture was highly place-based, built on the shared experiences of war, and created largely in isolation from women. Therefore, it was undeniably different from cultures on the Canadian Prairies, and young women living on the homefront were separated from it. However, the gap between the homefront and warfront was not as “uncrossable” as some historians have suggested. Many young soldiers were excited to share stories about this new culture in the letters they sent home. In this way, the unique culture of the Western Front was not a barrier between soldiers and their sisters, instead it was a new and exciting aspect of young men’s lives that they wanted to tell their sisters about.

#### Youthful “Tidbits”: Gossip and Girls

“So Carrie J and Verne fell out and then he started with Kate,” began Hadden Ellis’s venture into local gossip, in December 1916. “Whether he done it on purpose or not, boy he could not have done anything worse to get Carrie’s goat than to take Kate out.”<sup>24</sup> Twenty-two-year-old Hadden, who served with the Canadian Light Horse Regiment, was training in Somerset England when he sent this letter to his twenty-one-

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<sup>23</sup> Tim Cook, “Fighting Words: Canadian Soldiers’ Slang and Swearing in the Great War,” *War in History* 20/3 (2013): 343.

<sup>24</sup> CLIP, Hadden Ellis Fonds. Hadden Ellis to Lillian Ellis, December 7, 1916.

year-old sister Lillian in Calgary, Alberta. By the time this gossip travelled to Alberta it was likely old news to Lillian. Even though the gossip was stale, the act of gossiping about shared friends from home was an important way that soldiers and their civilian sisters spoke across their differing wartime experiences.

Gossiping was not only a pastime for youth in the Prairies; but it was also a mainstay of trench culture, as soldiers gossiped about other men, their commanders, and the war. Although this gossip was born on the Western Front, it did not stay there and soldiers often shared juicy details in their letters to their sisters. For example, after George Lamb heard that another soldier was telling people on the homefront that he was a lieutenant, George was happy to set the record straight telling his sister: “you can tell any of them who wish to know that he is a Buck private.”<sup>25</sup> While Gordon MacKay gossiped that “Percy was like most soldiers [and] had a girl at every corner.”<sup>26</sup> This type of gossip, in which soldiers gossiped about their own comrades, is especially interesting because it allowed soldiers to place their sisters as insiders against other soldiers. In doing so, soldiers clearly crossed the “chasm” by aligning themselves with their civilian sisters and against other soldiers who had committed acts worthy of gossip.

Soldiers also shared many of the war rumours they heard with their sisters. These ever-present rumours about the war’s progress and the barbarity of enemy troops were another “mainstay” of trench culture.<sup>27</sup> Soldier’s told their sisters many of the outlandish rumours they heard while stationed at training camps in England, before

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<sup>25</sup> GA, George Lamb to Mildred Lamb, Jan 17, 1917.

<sup>26</sup> CLIP, Gordon MacKay to Jessie MacKay, May 23, 1917 or 1918.

<sup>27</sup> Graham Seal, *The Soldiers' Press: Trench Journals in the First World War* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 10.

making their first trip to the Front. These rumours often highlighted the risks and excitement of battle. For example, George Redman told his sister that he and the other men in England were “falling over” themselves to get to the front lines, even though the average life expectancy in the trenches was “twenty-four hours,” while George Lamb told his sister that 16,000 Canadian soldiers had forced 50,000 Germans to retire to their trenches.<sup>28</sup> These exaggerated tales stress the masculinity and individual heroism that soldiers expected to find in the trenches. After serving on the front, soldiers continued to share many of the war rumors that spread through the troops, especially rumors suggesting that the war would end. The war rumors that brothers told their sisters suggest that soldiers believed that their sisters were well informed about the war and were interested to hear the most recent news about the war’s progress. For example, George Redman shared his opinion about Greece’s possible entry into the war: “I don't know if Greece will get into this scrap of ours. . . if she does of course it may lengthen the war a bit but I hardly think so for it would just give the Allies a chance to blockade the Mediterranean (is that right) & thereby make the food blockade complete.”<sup>29</sup> In this excerpt it is clear that George saw his sister as a smart and well informed correspondent, not an ignorant civilian.

Sharing gossip and stories about trench culture were important ways that siblings spoke across the distance created by their vastly different wartime experiences.

However, not all aspects of their wartime experiences were so different. Young women

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<sup>28</sup> CLIP, George Redman to Ivy Redman, September 20, 1915; George Lamb to Mildred Lamb, December 11, 1916.

<sup>29</sup> CLIP, Gordon MacKay to Jessie MacKay, January 17, 1917.

on the homefront and their soldier brothers both engaged in romantic relationships during the war and kept each other well informed about their love lives. These discussions were often humorous, sometimes scandalous, and in the case of long-term relationships, very sincere. Soldiers sometime spoke about romantic activities in letters to their parents, but these discussions appear more readily in letters between siblings. Further, many brothers shared information with their sisters that was clearly intended for their eyes only. Hadden Ellis used code to tell his sister that he had received a package from "L.W." but "Mums is the word."<sup>30</sup> Encryption like this would protect L.W.'s identity even if another family member read the letter. Similarly, Raymond Bell regularly wrote to his mother, but did not tell her about his fling in Seaford. However, he shared "the unadulterated truth" with his sister Marjorie, explaining that one woman "had the strangle hold on [him], but [he] managed to wriggle loose."<sup>31</sup> It appears that Marjorie also shared information with her brother that she likely did not tell their mother. Specifically, she told Raymond that she had seen a man at 2:30 am, causing Raymond to reply, "as for this 2:30 A.M. stuff nix on that, or rather on the kid, as I am afraid he would soon be "napoo" (that a new one eh?) if he tried any of these stunts."<sup>32</sup> In a later letter, he clarified that the "word napoo is from two French words, which mean 'gone under'," solidifying that his earlier message was a humorous threat.<sup>33</sup> Letters like these not only demonstrate the strong bond between siblings, but also contradict historian

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<sup>30</sup> CLIP, Hadden Ellis to Lillian Ellis, December 7, 1917.

<sup>31</sup> GA, Raymond Bell to Marjorie Bell, October 14, 1917.

<sup>32</sup> GA, Raymond Bell to Marjorie Bell, April 16, 1917.

<sup>33</sup> GA, Raymond Bell to Marjorie Bell, June 14, 1917. Punctuation added for clarity.

Dan Azoulay's argument that young Canadians were too busy "doing their bit" to pursue intimate relationships during the war.<sup>34</sup>

As the letters above suggest, soldiers often used humour when writing about their romantic relationships. "You might send me a nice engagement ring," Raymond Bell told his sister, further adding, "or perhaps half a dozen would be better."<sup>35</sup> Soldiers like Gordon MacKay also wrote humorously about their sisters' relationships. Gordon told his sister that her "new guy ... must be some[thing] eh!.. Id like to see the two legged wonder," suggesting that she should send him a photo of her boyfriend so he could donate it to a local museum, as they were "always on the lookout for any curiosities."<sup>36</sup> Humorous excerpts like this speak to the strong and jovial relationships that siblings shared throughout the war.

The stories siblings shared about their romantic relationships were not always humorous but could also be mature and earnest. After Leslie Redman proposed to a woman overseas, he happily told his sister Ivy that she "will have a Sister by law to be proud of." He also told her that his new fiancée, "would trust me any place, with anybody, at any time."<sup>37</sup> This specific excerpt suggest that Leslie wanted to show Ivy how trustworthy and dedicated his fiancée was. Trust was especially important during the war as soldiers had many opportunities to partake in infidelity while separated from their partners. Leslie's letters to Ivy demonstrate that he valued her opinion of his new

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<sup>34</sup> Dan Azoulay, *Hearts and Minds: Canadian romance at the dawn of the Modern Era, 1900–1930* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2011), 166.

<sup>35</sup> GA, Raymond Bell to Marjorie Bell, June 14, 1917, M-9377-2.

<sup>36</sup> CLIP, Gordon MacKay to Jessie MacKay, N.D.

<sup>37</sup> CLIP, Leslie Redman Fonds. Leslie Redman to Ivy Redman, N.D.



partner and he wanted his sister and fiancée to be friends. Unfortunately, Leslie was killed in battle before returning to Canada, and therefore never introduced his fiancée to his family at home.

Ivy's brothers were also interested in her romantic relationships, especially George. He expressed anger in March 1915, when she had problems with a young man named Albert, telling her, "some body could ring Alberts neck for him such miserable curs are better out of the way."<sup>38</sup> Leslie also supported Ivy by expressing sympathy when her sweetheart was killed overseas in 1917.

Very Very sorry to hear about your latest boyfriend. But there is one thing we all can say that knew him that he is better off in the land of the blest. Although I for one never conversed with him at all but I had often heard people talk of the work he did for the church when his health permitted him. You and his own relatives have my deepest smpathy.<sup>39</sup>

This excerpt demonstrates that Leslie wanted to comfort his sister during a difficult time. In an effort to do so, he drew on romantic language, which he did not normally use, such as the phrase "the land of the best."

The numerous descriptions detailing soldiers' romantic relationships further demonstrates that soldiers were not isolated from their civilian sisters. It is difficult to know the extent to which siblings shared stories about their romantic relationships before the war, but it appears that these wartime conversations may be a mark of continuity and not a departure from their pre-war lives. In small farming communities, brothers and sisters would have had similar friend groups, so they would likely be well acquainted with each other's romantic interests. Brothers also would have escorted

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<sup>38</sup> CLIP, George Redman to Ivy Redman, March 1, 1915.

<sup>39</sup> CLIP, Leslie Redman to Ivy Redman, April 2, 1917.

their sisters to social events such as dances, pointing to another way that siblings' romantic lives were intertwined during peacetime. Finally, brothers' general willingness and comfort with sharing stories about their romantic lives suggest they may also have done so during peace time.

### Brotherly Love and Teasing

As the examination above demonstrates, soldiers did not write empty letters that were "designed to say nothing" as military historians have suggested.<sup>40</sup> Instead they valued their correspondents and used letters a way to bridge the distance between the homefront and Western Front by sharing stories about the new trench culture and their youthful ventures, such as dating. Soldiers further remained connected with their sisters by sharing sentiments of love and admiration. For example, Gordon MacKay opened a letter to his sister by telling her, "Hello Jess, 'I see you', (in my dreams)."<sup>41</sup> Similarly, George Lamb enacted a romantic trope by telling his sister he would carry the dollar bill she sent him throughout the war as a "remembrance" and then return it to her in Canada.<sup>42</sup> Soldiers also demonstrated their affection by asking their sisters to send photographs of themselves. George Redman explained to his sister Ivy that he could carry only a few personal items while travelling across the Western Front, but told her to send him a photograph because he would "carry it some how."<sup>43</sup> Additionally, William Bell told his sister he would be happy to have her photograph but did not need it

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<sup>40</sup> Martyn Lyons, "French Soldiers and Their Correspondence: Towards a History of Writing Practices in the First World War," *French History* 17/1 (2003).

<sup>41</sup> CLIP, Gordon Ray MacKay to Jessie MacKay, May 12, 1917.

<sup>42</sup> GA, George Lamb to Mildred Lamb, June 7, 1917.

<sup>43</sup> CLIP, George Redman to Ivy Redman, April 6, 1916. Punctuation added for clarity.

because he could “shut [his] eyes and see [her] any time.”<sup>44</sup> These excerpts sound like conversations contemporary readers might expect to see between soldiers and their sweethearts, not their sisters. Historian Michael Roper found that soldiers also used sentiments strikingly similar to what modern readers would call ‘romantic language’ in the letters they wrote to their mothers during the Great War. He suggests that this similarity arose because British society did not sharply distinguish between familial love and romantic love during the early twentieth century as it does today, instead men in the early twentieth century expressed both kinds of love with similar sentiments.<sup>45</sup> Comparisons like this demonstrate why it is important for historians to carefully examine familial relationships in the past. And not assume that brothers and sisters in the past had the same kinds of relationships and experiences as brothers and sisters in the present.

French Historian Martha Hanna demonstrates that Great War scholars have often examined the immense bereavement that occurred during and after the war but not the loving relationships that caused this grief after death.<sup>46</sup> Soldiers’ letters provide an ideal way to study these loving relationships by exemplifying how different siblings expressed their emotional sentiments in different forms. For instance, Leslie Redman signed a letter to his sister Ivy with kisses, “xxx,” while none of the other soldiers did.<sup>47</sup> Meanwhile, his brother George Redman expressed his affection by repetitively telling Ivy

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<sup>44</sup> GA, William Bell to Sister, January 5, 1917.

<sup>45</sup> Michael Roper, *The Secret Battle: Emotional Survival in the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University, 2010), 227.

<sup>46</sup> Martha Hanna, “A Republic of Letters: The Epistolary Tradition in France during World War I,” *The American Historical Review* 108/5 (2003), 1342.

<sup>47</sup> GA, Leslie Redman to Ivy Redman, December 13, 1916

that he wished he could share some of his overseas adventures with her. While visiting their relatives in Britain he wrote, "I am having a fine rest and every thing I want. . . boy I wish you were here to enjoy it with me."<sup>48</sup> He also wished she could see the "lovely orchards in bloom" and smell the "beautiful country in spring time."<sup>49</sup> Loving sentiments like these contradict Keshen's claim that soldiers "expunged emotional or heartfelt matter" from their letters, which "was crucial in helping to keep families and particularly couples in touch," because they did not want the censors to read these personal messages.<sup>50</sup> In contrast the soldiers in this study often told their sisters about their love and admiration for them. Further, they expressed these sentiments in a range of different styles demonstrating that they did not rely on "clichés."

Of course, letters were not all love and admiration: soldiers also dedicated space to lightheartedly teasing their sisters. These jests were another way that soldiers bridged the distance the war created and remain connected to their sisters. For example, Raymond Bell commented that he was sorry his fifteen-year-old sister Mildred had "not entirely improved after [her] operation" but joked that a "little of old Poverty" was the best cure, as "too many late nights in Calgary might be the trouble" or "to many nice little boys."<sup>51</sup> Raymond also teased his sister Marjorie about her dating tendencies, writing that he was "very pleased to hear" that she had a new man and that she at least had "quantity if not quality" in her romantic ventures. Gordon MacKay also teased his sisters for dating many men, explaining that he didn't know if she was currently dating

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<sup>48</sup> CLIP, George Redman to Ivy Redman, January 19, 1917.

<sup>49</sup> CLIP, George Redman to Ivy Redman, May 24, 1916; George Redman to Ivy Redman, June 1, 1917.

<sup>50</sup> Keshen, *Censorship and Propaganda*, 157.

<sup>51</sup> GA, Raymond Bell to Mildred Bell, April 4, 1918.

the “Engineer or the druggist.”<sup>52</sup> Humour like this provides unique insight into the jovial relationship between siblings in the early twentieth century that is often very difficult for historians to see because these interactions would generally have occurred verbally during peacetime.

### The “Formulaic” Letter

Soldiers’ desire to maintain connected with their sisters, despite the great distance and difference between them, is obvious by the great amount of time and effort they dedicated to writing letters. This contradicts the arguments of military historians, who argue that soldiers’ letters were “unvarying” and “formulaic.”<sup>53</sup> Paul Fussell even argues that, for some soldiers “the form of the letter home was so rigid that no variation was allowed to violate it.”<sup>54</sup> In contrast, the soldiers in this study dedicated great time to crafting letters that were unique and entertaining for their sisters. Soldiers drew on literary techniques like alliteration and metaphor, and experimented with tone and form to make their letters interesting. For example, Gordon MacKay used alliteration to humorously express anger about his officers, telling his sister, “Gee Id like to tell them something sometimes somehow somewhere, some somes eh!” while Raymond Bell played with simile, telling his sisters, “it rained like a Holy Terror last night.”<sup>55</sup> Gordon MacKay also made his letters unique and exciting by experimenting with tone to create a western drawl: “Well Jess I jess guess its about time I dun gone and

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<sup>52</sup> CLIP, Gordon MacKay to Jessie, February 14, 1917.

<sup>53</sup> Keshen, *Censorship and Propaganda*, 157; Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 181.

<sup>54</sup> Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 182.

<sup>55</sup> GA, Raymond Bell to Marjorie Bell, July 17, 1918.

went and wrote you one of them ere things they calls a letter.”<sup>56</sup> Similarly, George Redman drew on Celtic dialect to say his fiancée was a “bonnie we Lassie.”<sup>57</sup> Raymond Bell also tried to make his letters interesting by playing with tone and pacing when he told his sister: “I am going to tell you right at the start that I am not going to try and write as long a letter as you did, first, because I am too lazy, second– too tired, third – too sleepy – 4th – no news – reasons late hours – cause of late hours – dance– cause of dance several itchy toes, slippery floor, good music, nice girls, good dancers.”<sup>58</sup>

Of course, not all soldiers had the ability to confidently play with literary techniques to this extent. Of the soldiers examined for this study, Hadden Ellis and George Lamb both completed high school and wrote with proper grammar and punctuation, but there is no indication that the other soldiers had a high school education. However, Gordon MacKay, Raymond Bell, and Aubrey Bell all wrote confidently and clearly. In contrast, the Redman brothers and William Bell (no relation to Raymond and Aubrey Bell) did not use proper sentence structure, grammar, or punctuation. The relatively low education of the soldiers included in this study likely reflects a national average, as Desmond Morton suggests that few men in the Canadian Expeditionary Force had above a grade six education.<sup>59</sup>

Historian Jeff Keshen suggests that soldiers sometimes struggled to express “truths” about their wartime experiences because of their poor education.<sup>60</sup> However,

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<sup>56</sup> GA, Gordon MacKay to Jessie MacKay, June 27, 1917.

<sup>57</sup> CLIP, George Redman to Ivy Redman, March 31, 1918.

<sup>58</sup> GA, Raymond Bell to Marjorie Bell, June 14, 1917.

<sup>59</sup> Desmond Morton, *When Your Number's Up* *When Your Number's Up*, 278.

<sup>60</sup> Keshen, *Censorship and Propaganda*, 155.

all the soldiers in this study could communicate complex situations with minimal writing skills. Even George Redman, arguably the least eloquent of the soldiers in this study, could describe complex situations with many possibilities and contingencies, a skill which epistolary historian Martyn Lyons suggests is one of the most difficult techniques correspondents faced.<sup>61</sup> In the following excerpt, George clearly expressed contingency, moved between events in the past and future, and discussed the actions of four people (himself, Ivy, Eric, and Leslie): “I believe I wrote you last time that I had seen Eric. Leslie I suppose will soon be over here, if you see him before he leaves tell him for me not to be in any hurry to get over here till spring.”<sup>62</sup> Although he can accomplish this difficult literary task, it is also clear that George sometimes struggled to express complex relationships. For example, in this excerpt, he states:

I am dropping you a line or two To thank you for the parcel. I am just waiting to see if there is a letter to follow received the parcel on the 19th and there was not date on it so I am waiting to see by letter when you sent it then I can tell you just how long it was coming...I am going to hang on to this letter until tomorrow & see if a letter comes or not. If not I will send it and answer it when it comes so I will have to tell you about my misfortune.<sup>63</sup>

In the above excerpt, George labouriously tries to tell his sister what has happened in the past (he received a parcel but not a letter) and his future plan, which is contingent on one variable (he will wait to see if he receives a letter from her before mailing the letter he is writing). Complex excerpts like this demonstrate that writing was not always

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<sup>61</sup> David Gerber, *Authors of Their Lives: The Personal Correspondence of British Immigrants to North America in the Nineteenth Century* (New York & London: NYU Press, 2005), 182.

<sup>62</sup> CLIP, George Redman to Ivy Redman, October 16, 1916.

<sup>63</sup> CLIP, George Redman to Ivy Redman, December 21, 1916.

easy for George; however, he struggled through the process and continued to correspond throughout the war, demonstrating the importance he placed on his relationship with his sister and his desire to sustain it.

### Strained Relations: George and Lilly Lamb

Twenty-two year old, George Lamb's relationship with his twenty-four-year-old sister Lily demonstrates how the distance between siblings could be furthered by miscommunication. Their problems began when Lilly wrote a cheerful letter to George with jokes and stories about a social event she had recently attended. After reading this letter, George responded, "Your epistle received a few days ago and the humour was most amusing, but it was hard to realize whether you really meant what you [said] in serious places or not. With such a war waging I cannot think of anything of this nature, but suppose it is different with you as you can't imagine yet that we are fighting for our very existence."<sup>64</sup> He further reprimanded Lily in a letter sent to his mother in which he explained, "By all accounts Lily has been experiencing some lively times, all her friends coming around... She can thank her stars she is not over here, or else she would be, or rather have to be, engaged in her spare hours, such as War work."<sup>65</sup>

Lilly's reactions to these reprimands were captured in a letter written by George's mother, in which she told George that Lily "feels sore at you for calling her down, she wrote as she did more to cheer you up not to take it seriously."<sup>66</sup> This misunderstanding became even more complicated when Lilly tried to rectify the

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<sup>64</sup> GA, George Lamb to Lillian Lamb, March 19, 1917.

<sup>65</sup> GA, George Lamb to Mary Lamb, April 7, 1917.

<sup>66</sup> GA, Mary Lamb to George Lamb, June 21, 1917.



situation by having a sergeant from the Home Guard write to George. It is impossible to know what was written in this letter; however, George was clearly appalled by it, telling his mother, "I have got that letter some 'Home Guard' Sgt. wrote to me under Lily's guidance and it will be a fine souvenir to show her when I come back, and my only hope is that I see that miserable cur who had such audacity to write such a manuscript."<sup>67</sup>

This entire situation was exacerbated by the slow mail system, especially when one of Lily's letters was greatly delayed. Lily wrote to George on September 14, 1917, after hearing he had been injured in a gas attack; however, the letter did not arrive until late in December. While this letter was lost George did not write to Lily, and explained that he feared she "she would never write again" because of their fight.<sup>68</sup> Their relationship remained strained throughout the war, although George was hopeful that he and Lily would work through their differences after the war when they could have a "good thresh out of things."<sup>69</sup> Unfortunately, George was killed in March 1918 before their relationship was repaired. This unhappy account demonstrates how miscommunications could quickly spin out of control and how delayed correspondence could make them difficult to remedy. George and Lily's experiences also provide a example of a distance which could not be crossed, death.

### Masculinity and Emotions

Strict gender roles created another barrier between brothers and sisters, further distancing their wartime experiences. Most clearly, gender norms forced young men to

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<sup>67</sup>GA, George Lamb to Mary Lamb, October 8, 1917.

<sup>68</sup>GA, George Lamb to Mary Lamb, October 8, 1917.

<sup>69</sup>GA, George Lamb to Mary Lamb, October 22, 1917.

participate in violence and banned women from it.<sup>70</sup> In the late Edwardian period, men were expected to be hardworking and independent, have good moral character, and act with emotional constraint.<sup>71</sup> Jeff Keshen argues that these gender expectations created great distance between soldiers and their families, as soldiers omitted everyday hardships from their letters to meet masculine ideals by presenting themselves as “true [men]” who could handle the hardships they faced and control their negative emotions.<sup>72</sup> Jessica Meyers challenges this claim, by demonstrating that British soldiers contradicted values of stoic masculinity by writing about their fears about death and injury in their letters. She also highlights the complex ways in which soldiers conformed to gender expectations by writing about their ability to thrive in the face of environmental adversity, sharing stories about their adventures, and continuing to fulfill their roles as protectors and providers for their families in their letters.<sup>73</sup>

The soldiers in this study also performed and undermined masculinity in complex ways when they wrote to their sisters. Sometimes, they constructed narratives reminiscent of the heroic battles depicted in propaganda and pre-war literature. Gordon MacKay described his first battle as a “regular Hell on earth,” however he bravely told

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<sup>70</sup> Canadian men aged 20-45 could be called to enlist after conscription legislation was passed in 1916. Of the men who registered approximately 93.7% applied for exemption, and 48,000 served overseas while 50,000 were training in Canada when the war ended. Jack Granatstein and J. MacKay Hitsman, *Broken Promises: A History of Conscription in Canada* (Toronto: Copp, Clark, Pitman, 1985), 87. For more information on men who applied for exemptions on the basis of conscientious objection see: Amy Shaw, *Crisis of Conscience Conscientious Objection in Canada during the First World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008). For an examination of the experiences of conscripted soldier who served overseas see: Patrick Dennis, *Reluctant Warriors: Canadian Conscripts and the Great War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2017).

<sup>71</sup> Stephanie Olsen, *Juvenile Nation: Youth, Emotions and the Making of the Modern British Citizen, 1880-1914* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014): 13-17.

<sup>72</sup> Keshen, *Censorship and Propaganda*, 157.

<sup>73</sup> Jessica Meyers, *Men of War: Masculinity and the First World War in Britain* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 14-46.

his sister: "I would not have missed it for anything."<sup>74</sup> Similarly, Raymond Bell romantically described the battle of Amiens, telling his sister: "It was the grandest sight of my life that morning, you couldn't see for miles behind the lines for cavalry, artillery and tanks all moving up to go over."<sup>75</sup> Contrastingly, Raymond also shared stories with his sister that undermined his masculinity by highlighting his cowardice and laziness. When he shared his most unheroic tales, he often referred to himself as "little Willie," telling his sister Marjorie that "little Willie" often "duck[ed] when a code-box [came] over."<sup>76</sup> He also explained that the men in his company were forced to clean the machine gun without him because at "cleaning time little Willie is nowhere to be seen."<sup>77</sup> Like many soldiers, "little Willie" also undermined masculine ideals by wishing for a "blighty," which was a non-life-threatening injury that allowed him to leave the front lines and return to England to recover. Specifically, Raymond told Marjorie that he hoped to get the flu as it "might mean another trip to hospital which would tickle little Willie all down to the ground."<sup>78</sup> Raymond's use of "little Willie" is clearly modeled on anti-heroes like Bruce Bairnsfather's famous cartoon soldier Old Bill, who was very popular among Great War soldiers. In Bairnsfather's cartoons Old Bill was often lazy or incompetent and used humor to make fun of his dreary life at war. Tim Cook argues that anti-heroes like Old Bill symbolized a division between civilians and soldiers because civilians saw soldiers as romantic heroes while soldiers self-identified with the lazy and

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<sup>74</sup> CLIP, Gordon MacKay to Jessie MacKay, May 12, 1917.

<sup>75</sup> GA, Raymond Bell to Marjorie Bell, Sept 31, 1918.

<sup>76</sup> GA, Raymond Bell to Marjorie Bell, April 2, 1918. "Code Box" was trench slang for a shell.

<sup>77</sup> GA, Raymond Bell to Marjorie Bell, May 31, 1918.

<sup>78</sup> GA, Raymond Bell to Marjorie Bell, October 17, 1918.

mischievous cartoon heroes.<sup>79</sup> Raymond's repetitively use of "little Willie" demonstrates yet another way that soldiers used trench culture to connect with their sisters and share their experiences. This conclusion is a stark contrast to the argument that trench culture created unpassable boundary between the home and warfront.

The other soldiers in this study also wrote letters that positioned them as anti-heroes, as opposed to heroic warriors, when they described many of the hardships they faced, including, rain which made "everything wet even the air"; being "sick as a dog" on overcrowded trains; sleeping in "funk holes," that felt like "dog kennels"; and lice that made men "so creepy" they "couldn't walk."<sup>80</sup> Soldiers also upset the images of hardworking and patriotic combatants by complaining about the imperial training and leadership regime. Recruits were quickly disenchanted by drills and lessons that seemed far removed from the realities of modern warfare and they were underwhelmed by the leadership of instructors who had yet to see front line action or only been at the front for a few months.<sup>81</sup> Gordon MacKay, for example complained that he was taught "150 preliminary movements" to complete before firing a rifle, and told his sister jokingly that this slow process was acceptable because "if you do anything wrong you [can] just ask Fritz to wait a minute till you get it right & then carry on."<sup>82</sup>

Soldiers also crossed the distance created by idealized understandings of brave and stoic masculinity by sharing their emotions of frustration, boredom, sadness, and

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<sup>79</sup> Tim Cook, "Anti-heroes of the Canadian Expeditionary Force," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 19/1 (2008): 173.

<sup>80</sup> GA, Raymond Bell to Marjorie Bell, December 17, 1916; George Redman to Ivy Redman, January 19, 1917; George Lamb to "Sister," Undated 1917.

<sup>81</sup> Morton, *When Your Number's Up*, 90-91.

<sup>82</sup> CLIP, Gordon MacKay to Jessie MacKay, January 17, 1917.

fear with their sisters. “There is always that longing for home & home folks that one can not conquer especially when we get our letters,” Gordon MacKay told his sister. He also acknowledged the heartbreaking reality that “we all feel certain that we are coming back, though it will be impossible for all of us.”<sup>83</sup> Clearly, soldiers shared many of their fears and frustrations with their sisters, however it is also important to acknowledge that soldiers sometimes chose not to discuss the disturbing things they experienced. For example, the soldiers in this examination rarely wrote about seeing dead bodies or severed limbs, seldomly discussed their experiences killing other men, and never spoke about sex or prostitution (all of which were prevalent on the Western Front). This relative silence could be used as evidence to argue that family communication broke down during the war or that Great War soldiers had an “unique” inability to communicate effectively, however it more likely speaks to humankind’s general difficulty discussing horrific experiences. Further, historians should not expect every letter to contain details about combat or fighting as soldiers did not experience fighting every day.<sup>84</sup>

Although soldiers avoided discussing some of the most gruesome and horrific things they experienced, they openly told their sisters about many of the hardships they faced. For instance, George Redman wrote to his younger sister, telling her that “the last month has pulled me down a lot... a lot of the boys are going under with being continually wet and the shelling is bad, I have been very lucky so far but how long [is] my

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<sup>83</sup> CLIP, Gordon MacKay to Jessie MacKay, January 6, 1917.

<sup>84</sup> Richard Grayson, “A Life in the Trenches? The use of Operation War Diary and Crowdsourcing Methods to Provide an Understanding of the British Army’s Day-to-Day Life on the Western Front,” *British Journal for Military History* 2/2 (2016), 18.

luck is going to last.”<sup>85</sup> He also told her that their younger brother was “lucky” to be shot in the leg because the injury would keep him out of the trenches, and as George explained, “I would rather be shot full of lead than put another winter in like last one.”<sup>86</sup> Similarly, William Bell reflected on his apathy for war, while recovering in the hospital, telling his sister, “say you know, or I don't know wether you know or not, the yerning a fellow has to here the guns[?], well I don't think I will ever have that yerning again.”<sup>87</sup> George Lamb also spoke about the violence and death in his letters, telling his sister that their mutual friend had been “blown to pieces” by a shell.<sup>88</sup> He further lamented on the hardships of war stating, “war is so indefinite, no future to look forward to only a trip back in the trenches.”<sup>89</sup>

In the face of these kinds of traumatic experiences, 15,000 Canadian soldiers were diagnosed with war-related psychological disorders during the conflict and many more experienced these issues but were never diagnosed.<sup>90</sup> Tim Cook places this reality in a thought-provoking context by suggesting that historians should not be surprised by how many men experienced shell shock in this conflict, but instead they should ask “why only so few did?”<sup>91</sup> Historians have pointed to numerous factors contributing to men’s emotional survival, including male camaraderie, patriotism, religion, rum, and fatalism.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> CLIP, George Redman to Ivy Redman, January 19, 1917.

<sup>86</sup> CLIP, George Redman to Ivy Redman, n.d.

<sup>87</sup> CLIP, William Bell to Evelin Bell, April 3, 1916. Punctuation added for clarity.

<sup>88</sup> GA, George Lamb to Mildred Lamb, June 2, 1917. a

<sup>89</sup> GA, George Lamb to Mildred Lamb, December 1917.

<sup>90</sup> Mark Humphries, “Wars Long Shadow: Masculinity, Medicine, and the Gendered Politics of Trauma, 1914–1939,” *The Canadian Historical Review* 91/3 (2010), 503.

<sup>91</sup> Tim Cook, “Spatial Sanctuaries and Normalizing Violence: The Canadian soldier on the Western Front during the Great War,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 49/3 (2015): 8.

<sup>92</sup> Tim Cook, *Shock Troops: Canadians Fighting the Great War, 1917-1918* (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2009), chapters 12-15.

Historian Michael Roper has also demonstrated that the emotional support men received from their mothers through consistent correspondence was an important part of their emotional survival.<sup>93</sup> Similarly, the young sisters who responded to letters like those highlighted above also provided important emotional support to their soldier brothers.

### Sisters' Emotion Work

Although soldiers and their sisters had incredibly different wartime experiences, sisters were often able to speak across this difference and provide emotional support to their brothers. Many soldiers openly told their sisters how important their letters were, such as when George Redman explained that Ivy's letter: "sure did me good as I was feeling pretty blue and we are getting it pretty rough."<sup>94</sup> Similarly, George Lamb explained to his sister, "Your welcome letter [came] to hand a few days ago and naturally I was most pleased to hear from you as a letter always throws an imagination as if I were at home and helps to cheer me up in this weary toil which seems to last an indefinite time."<sup>95</sup> Similarly, twenty-one-year-old Leslie Redman explained to his sister that he "live[d] for the mail" and twenty-three-year-old Gordon MacKay pleaded for his sister to: "write often and tell others to do so too for it is terrible lonely".<sup>96</sup> These examples demonstrate that soldiers greatly valued the letters they received from their sisters and drew emotional support from them.

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<sup>93</sup> Roper, *The Secret Battle*.

<sup>94</sup> CLIP, George Redman to Ivy Redman, October 14, 1917.

<sup>95</sup> GA, George Lamb to Sister, January 27, 1916.

<sup>96</sup> CLIP, Leslie Redman to Ivy Redman, April 2, 1917.

Responding to letters in which brothers described their fears and sadness was difficult work for sisters who worried about their brothers' health and safety.

Responding effectively often required them to perform emotion work. Emotion work, as described by Arlie Hochschild, is the act of "inducing or suppressing feelings" to support others.<sup>97</sup> The young women in this study likely manipulated their own emotions of fear and stress to help console their brothers by writing supportive and hopeful letters.

Kristine Alexander demonstrated that emotion work is often overlooked by historians; however, girls and young women in the early twentieth century were clearly expected to perform this type of work.<sup>98</sup> In diligently answering letters from their brothers, the young women in this study helped their brothers cope with many of the challenges they faced even though they were so far removed from the violence their brothers experienced.

The siblings in this study also crossed the immense distance created by the war, to work together to support their parents. For instance, Raymond Bell repeatedly asked his sister Marjorie to try to "keep Mother as cheery as possible" and provided practical advice by suggesting that Marjorie should convince their mother to travel to Calgary, where she would have more friends than on their often-isolated homestead.<sup>99</sup> Brothers and sisters also occasionally worked together to protect their mothers from bad news. For example, William Bell told his younger sister that he had been injured and spent five

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<sup>97</sup> Arlie Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: The commercialization of human feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985 reprint 2012), 7.

<sup>98</sup> Kristine Alexander, "Agency and Emotion Work," 123 – 126.

<sup>99</sup> GA, Raymond Bell to Marjorie Bell, May 2, 1917.



days in hospital, but he did not tell his parents, as he did not want to worry them.<sup>100</sup>

Similarly, after getting his “first taste of shell fire,” Gordon MacKay wrote two letters, one to his sister and one to his mother. Although he quickly mailed his sister’s letter, he destroyed his mother’s as it was too “blue.”<sup>101</sup> In doing so he tried to protect his mother from stress, and likely put more pressure on his sister to respond to this “blue” letter with emotional support.

When soldiers like Gordon MacKay left their family farms to serve overseas they moved into a male dominated space with a unique and exclusive culture, and saw unthinkable horrors, far different from anything their sisters experienced on the homefront. However, the chasm this created between siblings was not un-crossable. Soldiers shared exciting stories from their new lives and spoke about their fears. As Gordon explained, soldiers waited “breathlessly” with “anxious heart[s] & longing eyes” to see if the latest mail delivery had brought them any letters from home.<sup>102</sup> These much-desired letters not only bridge the distance between siblings but also provided important emotional support for soldiers.

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<sup>100</sup> CLIP, William Bell to “Sister,” April 3, 1916.

<sup>101</sup> CLIP, Gordon MacKay to Georgie MacKay, May 13, 1917; Gordon MacKay to Jessie MacKay, May 12, 1917.

<sup>102</sup> CLIP, Gordon MacKay to Jessie, January 17, 1917.

### CHAPTER 3: "My Dear Papa"

The young people examined in the previous chapter relied on their ability to read and write to communicate across the incredible distances created by the war. Unlike these young adults, six-year-old Arnott Brook could only form short and simple sentences like these:

My Dear Papa:-

How are you? I am getting better of a cold. For Christmas I got slippers, mitts, two saucers, a cup, a pitcher, a bowl, and a soldier and his horse, two handkerchiefs, blocks, a bank and that pretty card you sent me. Glen got a dog and a doll. Alice got a rattle and a pair of bootees. Come home soon.

Lovingly Arnott <sup>1</sup>

Arnott's four-year-old brother, Lorne, was even more limited in his written communication, the extent of which is captured here:



Figure 1: Lorne Brook's letter to his father Sidney Brook

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<sup>1</sup> Glenbow Archives, Brook Family Fonds. Arnott Brook to Sidney Brook, January 12, 1916.

The five Brook children, Arnott, Lorne, Gordon, Glen and Alice, were ages eight, six, four, two, and not yet born when their father enlisted. These young people were arguably even further distanced from their father than the siblings examined in the last chapter. Their limited literacy skills meant that they struggled to communicate with their father directly or independently. However, they drew on a plethora of other strategies to remain connected with him. For example, they interacted with a memory or image of Sidney nearly every day, thereby adding layers of meaning to their relationships with him. They also protected and treasured letters he sent, created special gifts to send him, and brought his presence into their home by talking about him. Their continued and effective efforts to overcome this distance and maintain their relationships with their father will be the focus of this chapter.

In 2005, Glen Brook's wife, Irene Brook, donated hundreds of the Brook family's letters to the Glenbow Museum. The fond includes 94 wartime letters from Sidney, 113 from Isabelle, 2 letters from Gordon, one letter from Arnott, and scribbled sheets of paper from Lorne and Glen. Although this is an impressive amount of correspondence, it is also clear that many letters are missing from the collection. Isabelle and Sidney both talk about the "cards" that Sidney sent to the boys during the war; however none of these cards (which were presumably addressed to individual children) were donated to the Glenbow.<sup>2</sup> It is likely that the boys stored their cards separately from the letters that

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<sup>2</sup> GA, Brook Family Fonds. GA, Isabelle Brook to Sidney Brook, July 19, 1916; November 15, 1916; November 22, 1916; December 13, 1916; January 6, 1917; July 10, 1917; October 29, 1917 and GA, Sidney Brook to Isabelle, November 16, 1916; December 11, 1916; Jan 1, 1917; November 12, 1917, December 2, 1917.

Isabelle saved, and these cards were subsequently passed on to different family members or lost in the eighty-seven years between the war's end and the collection's donation. It is also clear that the boys sent numerous letters to Sidney during the war, yet only a few have survived. Ironically, the great sentimental value that Sidney placed on his children's letters likely led to their absence in the current collection. It appears that Sidney mailed most of the letters he received to his sister in England after reading them, and she saved them until after the war. However, his pockets were also "jammed full of love letters."<sup>3</sup> These precious letters travelled across the Western Front in his pockets until they became wet, tattered, and torn and were replaced with new ones. Sidney sometimes describes these special letters, giving modern readers a peak at the sentiments he chose to keep close to his heart. Specifically, he told Isabelle about one letter in which Gordon said that Sidney was "very brave." As Sidney explained, this "beauty" was stored in his left breast pocket, beside his Bible.<sup>4</sup>

The children's missing letters would have provided great insight into their wartime lives. Luckily, Isabelle's letters also provided valuable information, as she described her children's wartime lives in the letters she wrote to Sidney. For example, in one letter from July 5, 1917:

It's just about tea-time, Alice is having her supper and a stack of unironed clothes are here on the end of the table staring at me. Lorne & Glen are buzzing around the room, which is no balm for 'nerves'. I've had a baking fire on for quite awhile now & had hoped to utilize it for the ironing too — but the irons are still hot and the clothes unironed. I've baked bread, and now have fruit cake in the oven — one which I've meant to cook for a good while — however, it's at last made, and we may get a parcel off to you to-morrow.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> GA, Sidney Brook to Isabelle Brook, January 23, 1917.

<sup>4</sup> GA, Sidney Brook to Isabelle Brook, March 18, 1917.

<sup>5</sup> GA, Isabelle Brook to Sidney Brook, July 5, 1917.

This excerpt captures the daily bustle that filled the Brook home. Chores piled up, nerves were tested, and children buzzed. The excerpt also captures the family's shared effort: "We may get a parcel off to you to-morrow." Of course, other than Isabelle, none of the people who made up this "we" were over the age of eight. Yet in Isabelle's letter, they are united, bound by their shared goal to support their husband and father.

This "we" was further intertwined because Isabelle and her five children spent most of the war crammed inside their home in Cragimyle, Alberta. Isabelle's stress and joy travelled to her children's rooms while the money she spent filled their plates and the rules she enforced shaped their daily routines. The children's unpaid work helped the household function while their childhood illnesses caused immense fear and suspended daily routines. Although physically absent, Sidney also occupied space in this home. His empty chair or neatly folded clothes were physical reminders of his absence.<sup>6</sup> Finally, the letters Sidney sent served as physical manifestations of his love and influence. Evidently, the lives of the Brook family members were greatly intertwined. Therefore, this chapter will examine not only how the Brook children worked to maintain their connections with their absent father, but how the entire family worked to achieve this.

Before examining how the Brook family overcame the great distance they faced during the war, it is important to contextualize the relationships between fathers and their children in the early twentieth century. Historians such as Robert Grisworld

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<sup>6</sup> For an in-depth examination of the emotional meaning families attached to the domestic space's men occupied (such as their chairs) see Julie-Marie Strange, "Fatherhood, furniture and the inter-personal dynamics of working-class homes, c. 1870–1914," *Urban History* 40/2 (2013): 271-286.

suggest that American fathers from Industrialization to the end of the First World War were economic providers who did not have strong emotional connections with their children.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, scholars such as Julie-Marie Strange, Stephan Frank, and Megan Doolittle have shown that Victorian and Edwardian fathers had meaningful relationships with their children.<sup>8</sup> For example, fathers played with their children, guided their character training, helped them with schooling, and even nursed them through illnesses. The close and loving relationships between Sidney Brook and his children are demonstrated by the heartfelt letters he wrote to his family, including this excerpt from November 6, 1916: “It would be a treat to land in on you all tonight, or if I could only dream of you as you really are - but no dreams seem to come my way, like a soldier, I think of home + loved one’s last.”<sup>9</sup> Sidney further demonstrated the deep connection he shared with his children by telling Isabelle how much their small gifts meant to him: “I have a comfortable pair of brown socks on my feet that dear little Lorne sent me (Give him a good hearty kiss from me - a little dewdrop is bound it will blur my vision).”<sup>10</sup> Sidney and Isabelle’s letters suggest that Sidney was a caring and loving father, who missed – and was missed by – his family. The affection he displayed was not an anomaly,

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<sup>7</sup> Robert L. Griswold, *Fatherhood in America: A History* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

<sup>8</sup> Julie-Marie Strange, "Fatherhood, Providing, and Attachment in Late Victorian and Edwardian Working-Class Families," *The Historical Journal* 55/4 (2012): 1007-1027; Stephen M. Frank, *Life with Father: Parenthood and masculinity in the nineteenth-century American North* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1998); Megan Doolittle, "Fatherhood, religious belief and the protection of children in nineteenth-century English families," in *Gender and Fatherhood in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Trev Lynn Broughton and Helen Rogers, 31-42 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> GA, Sidney Brook to Isabelle Brook, November 16, 1916.

<sup>10</sup> GA, Sidney Brook to Isabelle Brook, January 23, 1917.

as Kristine Alexander demonstrates; many Canadian soldiers showed affection in the letters they wrote to their daughters.<sup>11</sup>

Historians such as Julie-Marie Strange have also challenged the dichotomy that fathers were either loving playmates or cold economic providers. Strange demonstrates that children and their fathers often associated the act of providing with “intimate and individual meaning, reimagining breadwinning as an act of devotion.”<sup>12</sup> Sidney’s letters suggest that he attached great sentimental meaning to his role as an economic provider. He often told his family about the great amount of time, care, and attention he dedicated to buying them gifts. He asked Isabelle what kinds of gifts the children would like, and in December 1917, he walked four miles to a local town twice in one week to buy a pearl necklace and a bunny for Alice, a neckerchief for Lorne and Glen, and a knitted suit and handkerchief for Gordon.<sup>13</sup> Sidney also worried about his family’s finances throughout the war and often checked with Isabelle to make sure that the family was not going without.

Throughout the war, Sidney worried that he would not recognize his children after the war: “How is Alice May?” he asked, “And little Glen is walking and talking eh? Guess I won’t know the family when I return.”<sup>14</sup> These fears highlight yet another form of distance that further separated families: during Sidney’s absence his children changed

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<sup>11</sup> Kristine Alexander, “An Honour and a Burden: Canadian Girls and the Great War,” in *A Sisterhood of Suffering and Service: Women and Girls of Canada and Newfoundland During the First World War*, ed. Sarah Glassford & Amy Shaw, 171-194 (Vancouver, UBC Press, 2012), 183.

<sup>12</sup> Strange, “Fatherhood, Providing, and Attachment in Late Victorian and Edwardian Working-Class Families,” 1007.

<sup>13</sup> GA, Sidney Brook to Isabelle Brook, December 2, 1917.

<sup>14</sup> GA, Sidney Brook to Isabelle Brook, December 26, 1916.

and grew, resembling less and less the young people he had known before the war. In response to Sidney's fears that he would not "know the family," Isabelle regularly told him about their children's changing bodies and personalities, so that the images in his mind accurately reflected the young people in her home. She worked carefully to ensure that each child had a unique and individual presence in her letters. Arnott, she explained, was very popular with the neighbourhood children and was seen as quite a "likeable little fellow," while Gordon did not "mix with the others so much."<sup>15</sup> However, Gordon did well in school and was "very bright about learning," while Arnott struggled.<sup>16</sup> She also explained that the pair were "not such bad boys at all — quite too quarrelsome tho'." Isabelle described two-year-old Glen as a "mischievous cute little chicken" who was always "up to all kinds of mischief."<sup>17</sup> Isabelle provided many stories to back up this claim. For example, after noticing that the house was "very quiet", she went to the kitchen to find Glen "sitting at the open cabinet door helping himself to a whole duck! one of the little roast wild ones."<sup>18</sup> She also told numerous stories about Glen causing havoc with the a plethora of items including the salt and pepper shaker, dishwashing tub, mouth organ, and her writing paper.<sup>19</sup> Isabelle described four-year-old Lorne as a loving boy who often talked about his father: "Lorne asks so often very pitifully for "Papa" —he can't seem to understand why you don't come."<sup>20</sup> She also related many stories about Lorne doting over his baby sister and his "persistence in

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<sup>15</sup> GA, Isabelle Brook to Sidney Brook, July 31, 1917.

<sup>16</sup> GA, Isabelle Brook to Sidney Brook, December 7, 1916.

<sup>17</sup> GA, Isabelle Brook to Sidney Brook, July 31, 1917.

<sup>18</sup> GA, Isabelle Brook to Sidney Brook, October 13, 1916.

<sup>19</sup> GA, Isabelle Brook to Sidney Brook, April 16, 1917; October 13, 1916; July 26, 1916; November 29, 1917.

<sup>20</sup> GA, Isabelle Brook to Sidney Brook, Sept. 12, 1916.



calling Glen and Alice ‘Papa’s Babies.’”<sup>21</sup> Isabelle described Alice as a sweet and pretty baby, explaining that she was “quite a fat little dot, with a great crop of hair.”<sup>22</sup>

As the war stretched on, the distance and difference between the children Sidney had left behind in 1916 and the young people he would meet after the war continued to grow. Sidney and Isabelle also worried that the children’s memory of their father would become more and more distant the longer he was away. Sidney captured both fears in this excerpt from October 1917: “I’m afraid I’ll not know my dear boys on my return -- I hope they’ll remember their papa.”<sup>23</sup> Sidney was not alone in his fear, as many Canadian fathers worried that their children would not remember them.<sup>24</sup> Nor were his fears unfounded; historian William Tuttle demonstrated this reality in his monograph *Daddy Goes to War*, in which he tells the stories of many Americans who did not recognize their fathers when they were reunited after World War II.<sup>25</sup>

In the face of these challenges, the Brook family drew on many strategies, some of which mirror the strategies used by families and children in other allied countries. For instance, historian Rosie Kennedy suggests that British children worked to maintain relationships with their soldier fathers by telling them stories about their everyday lives to “situate their fathers back into the center of their own domestic landscape.”<sup>26</sup> The

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<sup>21</sup> GA, Isabelle Brook to Sidney Brook, November 4, 1916; November 12, 1916; January 5, 1917.

<sup>22</sup> GA, Isabelle Brook to Sidney Brook, November 6, 1916.

<sup>23</sup> GA, Sidney Brook to Isabelle Brook, October 22, 1917.

<sup>24</sup> Kristine Alexander and Ashley Henrickson, “Children, Soldiers, and Letter-Writing in Canada’s First World War,” in *Children, Youth and War Anthology*, ed. Barbra Lorezkowski, Kristine Alexander and Andrew Burtch, forthcoming.

<sup>25</sup> William Tuttle, *Daddy's Gone to War: The Second World War in the lives of America's children* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 218.

<sup>26</sup> Rosie Kennedy, *The Children's War: Britain 1914-1918* (Houndsmill: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 25-41.

few surviving letters written by the Brook children suggest that they also tried to make Sidney a part of their day-to-day life. Gordon told Sidney about his progress at school by dictating a letter for Isabelle to scribe, which read, "I wrote 'I see a hat.' and 'Pat has 2 hats,' at school."<sup>27</sup> In his letter from January 1917, Gordon also told Sidney about his daily life, explaining, "I did not go to school yesterday and to-day. Yesterday was awful windy and to-day is cold too. I do like to go to school."<sup>28</sup> Sidney also worked to insert himself into this domestic space by trying to shape his children's education, suggesting that Isabelle should send the boys to school as often as possible. He was also very clear that Gordon and Arnott should not go to school when it is too cold or when they were sick, as he argued that, "good health is preferable to schooling."<sup>29</sup>

In addition to integrating Sidney in their everyday lives, Isabelle and the children shared special days with him. They packed Christmas parcels for him and wrote to tell him about the gifts they received. Gordon also tried to send his first baby tooth to Sidney, but Isabelle advised against it, fearing it would get lost in the mail. As Isabelle explained, the boys put great care into making special days for Sidney by sending him packages. On May 30, 1917, Isabelle summarized the parcels that the family had sent:

Jan. 16 - Two parcels - doughnuts, mince pies, socks, pudding etc.  
Feb. 3 - 4 lb. parcel - cookies, & boys' candy  
Feb. 15 - 6 ¾ lb parcel - coffee cake, cookies, maple cream  
Feb. 28 - Letter with \$5 bill  
Mar. 7 - 5 lb 12 oz parcel - fruit cake, socks, soap etc.  
Mar. 31 - 5 lb parcel - assorted cookies  
Apr. 5 - 4 lb 10 oz parcel - cookies & h'd'k'fs [handkerchiefs]  
May 4 - 7 lb 2 oz parcel - Plum pudding, maple butter, honey & soap  
May 16 - 6 ¼ lb parcel - currant cookies, 2 h'd'k's, candles, & Arnott's candy<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Gordon Brook to Sidney Brook, undated ca July – August 1916.

<sup>28</sup> GA, Gordon Brook to Sidney Brook, January 12, 1917.

<sup>29</sup> GA, Sidney Brook to Isabelle Brook, February 14, 1914.

<sup>30</sup> GA, Isabelle Brook to Sidney, 1917.

As this list demonstrated, most of the parcels were mostly made up of treats or “extras” meant to cheer Sidney up.<sup>31</sup> These carefully packaged gifts — intended to bring comfort and happiness — can be read as work that aimed to add love and intimacy to the family’s relationship.

### Keeping Sidney’s Memory Alive

The many letters and gifts Sidney and his family exchanged are important ways that the Brooks remained connected during the war. Additionally, the family used many other strategies to make Sidney’s presence felt in their home even though he was thousands of miles away. For instance, Isabelle often spoke about Sidney as she went along with her daily tasks. While undressing Lorne, she wondered aloud where Sidney was, to which Lorne replied: “I guess he’s in Brighton.”<sup>32</sup> Historian Hester Vaisey suggests that mothers performed actions like this in an effort to keep their departed husbands “alive” in the “active imaginations” of their children.<sup>33</sup>

Gordon, Arnott, and Lorne also worked make Sidney’s presence felt in the home by reminding Isabelle about him and his place in the family. When Isabelle referred to two-year-old Glen as “Mamma’s baby,” Lorne reminded her that Glen was “Papa’s Baby,” too. This nickname stuck, and Glen was referred to as “Papa’s Baby” throughout

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<sup>31</sup> Helen McCartney, *Citizen Soldier: The Liverpool Territorials in the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 96. Michael Roper; *The Secret Battle: Emotional Survival in the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University, 2010), 98-99.

<sup>32</sup> GA, Isabelle Brook to Sidney Brook, August 19, 1917. This was a very well-informed guess as Sidney often visited his family in Brighton while on leave.

<sup>33</sup> Hester Vaizey, “Parents and Children in Second World War Germany: An Inter-Generational Perspective on Wartime Separation,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 46/2, (2011): 381.

the war.<sup>34</sup> A few months after this initial nicknaming, baby Alice arrived, and Lorne began calling her “Papa’s baby.” So, Isabelle asked him: “whose baby was Glen then” and Lorne replied, “two babies – Papa two babies.”<sup>35</sup> The children’s persistence at referring to the youngest children as “Papa’s two babies” demonstrates one way that they interacted with the image of Sidney and reminded each other, Isabelle, and the two youngest children about Sidney and his place in their family. The boys also preserved their father’s presence and interacted with their memories of him by teaching baby Alice about Sidney. Arnott worked with Isabelle to teach Alice to say “Papa,” and Lorne informed her that she “had a nice mamma & nice papa a-n-d nice ‘buddies’ lots of buddies (brothers),” and later that she had “a nice Papa in France.”<sup>36</sup>

Like the Brooks, many twenty-first century families also work to make a deployed parent’s presence felt in their home. Thousands of American families purchase giant cut-outs of their deployed parent called “Flat Daddies” or “Flat Mommies”. These literal images of parents stand in family’s homes as “active placeholders,” filling a loved one’s place until they return.<sup>37</sup> Children and other family members talk to the Flat Parent, take pictures with it, and even take it to soccer games or community events. The Brook children could not make a life-size cut-out of their father, but they did create an image of him in their home by teaching their younger siblings about him and imagining what he would do if he were home. Lorne did this by rocking baby Alice and singing,

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<sup>34</sup> GA, Isabelle Brook to Sidney Brook, October 3, 1916.

<sup>35</sup> GA, Isabelle Brook to Sidney Brook, November 4, 1917.

<sup>36</sup> GA, Isabelle Brook to Sidney Brook, November 12, 1917; March 21, 1917, April 2, 1917.

<sup>37</sup> Rebecca A. Adelman, “Thank You for Our Flat Daddy”: Photography, Imagination, and Citizenship as Child’s Play,” *Photography and Culture* 6:1 (2013), 65-80.

“Papa would kiss you. Papa would kiss you.”<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Gordon and Arnott told Isabelle that Sidney would be happy to see the new home renovations when he returned.<sup>39</sup> The boys also remembered their father each night by mentioning him in their prayers, asking God to “bless Papa, and care for us all.”<sup>40</sup>

Many contemporary children treasure their “Flat Daddies” as physical objects that stand in for their fathers and as “a visual target for their affections.”<sup>41</sup> The Brook children appear to have similarly treasured the letters that Sidney sent them. As David Gerber aptly described, wartime letters are not only vessels that carry information but also physical objects created by the hands of loved ones, which were greatly treasured by homefront families.<sup>42</sup> The Brook boys waited anxiously for letters from their fathers then carried them into some of the most private spaces of their home.<sup>43</sup> Arnott collected all his letters and “hid” them in a shoe box on his bookshelf.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, Lorne stole a letter from Isabelle’s desk and hid it under his covers.<sup>45</sup> The ways the boys protected and treasured Sidney’s letters, along with their efforts to create an image of him in their home, are a few of the ways that they worked to keep make Sidney’s presence felt in their home, preventing him from becoming a distant memory.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> GA, Isabelle Brook to Sidney Brook, April 25, 1917.

<sup>39</sup> GA, Isabelle Brook to Sidney Brook, July 10, 1916.

<sup>40</sup> GA, Isabelle Brook to Sidney Brook, March 11, 1917.

<sup>41</sup> Adelman, “Thank You for Our Flat Daddy,” 69.

<sup>42</sup> David Gerber, *Authors of Their Lives: The personal correspondence of British immigrants to North America in the Nineteenth Century* (New York & London: NYU Press, 2005), 320.

<sup>43</sup> Examples of boys waiting anxiously for cards: GA, Isabelle Brook to Sidney Brook, July 26, 1916.

<sup>44</sup> GA, Isabelle Brook to Sidney Brook, October 29, 1917.

<sup>45</sup> GA, Isabelle Brook to Sidney Brook, Feb 18, 2018.

<sup>46</sup> For further analysis of how the Brook children, and other Canadian families, maintained relationships with their enlisted fathers see: Kristine Alexander and Ashley Henrickson, “Children, Soldiers, and Letter-Writing in Canada’s First World War.”

Historians can examine many of these efforts because Isabelle recorded their daily lives in such detail. It is likely that the young sisters in the previous chapter also treasured the letters their brother sent, imagined what they would do if they were home, and reminded others about them. However, these young people did not systematically record their efforts in the letters they sent to their brothers, making their strategies difficult for historians to trace. Isabelle's letters are therefore especially valuable because they show a side of wartime work that are rarely captured in the historical record, but which was likely done by many families.

In addition to creating this unique record, Isabelle played a very interesting role as a translator, capturing her children's physical actions and verbal phrases and translating them into words written on paper, which could be sent in the mail to Sidney (and later preserved in archives). Sometimes she quoted the children verbatim, explaining that Lorne exclaimed, "Me yite letty, Papa" [me write letter, Papa] or that Arnott said, "My! I wish Papa'd come home to-night."<sup>47</sup> More often, she summarized the children's words, explaining that Lorne "speaks about his 'Papoo' most every day" or that "Glen's been talking about 'Papa' to-day."<sup>48</sup> As the narrator of her children's lives, Isabelle had a lot of power to shape Sidney's – and now historians' – understanding of the Brook children's wartime story. Although Isabelle may have exaggerated descriptions about the children missing their father in attempt to comfort Sidney, it is likely that she is a reliable narrator. She was very honest with Sidney and openly told

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<sup>47</sup> GA, Isabelle Brook to Sidney Brook, February 16, 1917; August 19, 1916.

<sup>48</sup> GA, Isabelle Brook to Sidney Brook, August 6, 1916; August 19, 1916

him that Arnott did not recognize him in a photograph and that Glen would not remember him.<sup>49</sup> It is also possible that Isabelle downplayed some of the stress and anxiety that her children felt to comfort Sidney. This also seemed unlikely because she openly told Sidney about the many childhood illness the children contracted, even though this invariably caused Sidney stress. Isabelle also acted as a translator by reading Sidney's letters aloud and therefore turning his written prose into verbal communication that her children could understand. This position provided her with the opportunity to mediate and possibly change the interactions between Sidney and the children. She could put words in Sidney's mouth by adding phrases that were not in the letters or skip portions of the letter all together.

Sidney recognized the important role Isabelle played in his family's communication and often asked her to pass specific messages to the children. Interestingly, he often described the war in an exciting light when he wrote these personalized messages. For example, on October 9, 1916, he asked Isabelle to: "tell [Gordon and Arnott] we have aeroplanes flying over us continually, how they'd like to watch them!"<sup>50</sup> This message paints an adventurous picture of war, highlighting the role of airplanes, a new and exciting technology. Sidney also highlighted the more lighthearted side of war when he asked Isabelle to "tell Gordon + Arnott I own a pair of clippers and have cut over a hundred heads of hair."<sup>51</sup> Sidney's descriptions of war align with Kennedy's conclusion that English fathers often wrote letters that created a world

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<sup>49</sup> GA, Isabelle Brook to Sidney Brook, August. 18, 1917; May 13, 1917.

<sup>50</sup> GA, Isabelle Brook to Sidney Brook, October 9, 1916.

<sup>51</sup> GA, Sidney Brook to Isabelle Brook, January 18, 1917.

on paper that was exciting and heroic but also safe for their children to engage with.<sup>52</sup>

This kind of communication clearly required emotion work, as Sidney donned a lighthearted and positive tone.<sup>53</sup> Sidney also tried to share some of the “adventures” of war with his children by sending them war souvenirs. In December 1916, he sent “the boys” German and French bullets that he “dug out of an old trench,” cap badges, and watches.<sup>54</sup> As Tim Cook explained, war souvenirs taken from the front lines, prisoners’ pockets, or dead bodies were proof that soldiers were at battle and victorious.<sup>55</sup>

### Fear and Emotion Work

Of course, war was not all a happy adventure, and Sidney also shared the darker side of war in his letters. For instance, he concluded his letter of May 3, 1917 writing, “[P.P.P.S.] Our noble battalion has suffered terribly on and since Easter Monday - I’ll be afraid to look for old familiar faces in the remains of the battalion - I have two watches that I got Walter to fix just returned, but I can never have the pleasure of handing them to the owners.”<sup>56</sup> It is impossible to know if Isabelle read these parts of the letters to her children or if she skipped over them. However, it is likely that boys had an accurate understanding of the hardships of war, not a distant and romantic understanding of the conflict. Isabelle’s description of her three-year-old neighbour, Francis Wilson,

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<sup>52</sup> Kennedy, *The Children’s War*,

<sup>53</sup> For an examination of what Canadian fathers spoke about in letters to their daughters see Kristine Alexander, “‘An Honour and a Burden’: Canadian Girls and the Great War,” in *A Sisterhood of Suffering and Service: Women and Girls of Canada and Newfoundland During the First World War*, ed Sarah Glassford & Amy Shaw, 171-194. (Vancouver, UBC Press, 2012).

<sup>54</sup> GA, Sidney Brook to Isabelle Brook, December 20, 1916.

<sup>55</sup> Tim Cook, “‘Tokens of Fritz’: Canadian Soldiers and the Art of Souveniring in the Great War,” *War and Society* 31/3 (2012): 212.

<sup>56</sup> GA, Sidney Brook to Isabelle Brook, May 3, 1917.



demonstrates that children living in Craigmyle had a comprehensive understanding of the war. After Sidney was wounded in 1917, Francis came to Isabelle's door and told her that he had read in the newspaper that Sidney was wounded in the arm. As Isabelle explained, Francis "knew all about how it happened" and gave her a very "graphic picture of it all." He explained:

A German jumped up out of a hole in the ground, you [Sidney] were carrying mail, I think, and he [the German] ran after you, and you know they were going awful fast and you got shot, and then you lay in a field for ever so long, and then were moved into another field over north...<sup>57</sup>

The story is clearly fictional; however, it is filled with information that demonstrates Francis's accurate understanding of events on the Western Front. Men did carry letters, get shot, and lie in the fields waiting for help. If the Brooks' three-year-old neighbour, whose immediate family was not serving in the war, understood the conflict in such detail we can assume that Gordon, Arnott, and perhaps even Lorne did as well.

It is not surprising that a young child like Francis had such a vivid picture of life on the Western Front because adults, in most countries, did not hide the war from children.<sup>58</sup> Teachers in English-speaking Canada were strongly encouraged to teach their students about the war and did so "dutifully, if not enthusiastically."<sup>59</sup> Therefore, Gordon and Arnott likely learned a great deal about the war in their classroom. Further, the children joined Isabelle at patriotic events, such as basket socials, dances, and Red Cross fundraisers, events that often presented the war as a heroic and romantic venture

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<sup>57</sup> GA, Isabelle Brook to Sidney Brook, June 19, 1917.

<sup>58</sup> Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *14-18: Understanding the Great War* (New York, Hill and Wang, 2014), 111.

<sup>59</sup> Susan Fisher, *Boys and Girls in No Man's Land: English Canadian Children and the First World War* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2011), 16.

while also highlighting the dangers of war by honouring soldiers who had been killed. It is difficult to know how these influences shaped the children's understanding of the war; however, historian Kristine Moruzi has demonstrated that Canadian children, like the Brooks, understood many of the hardships of war.<sup>60</sup>

The children also saw the harsh realities of war unfold in their own community, as at least nine men from Craigmyle served overseas. Historical population data is not available for Craigmyle, but it would have been significantly smaller than the neighbouring town of Delia, which had a population of 187 in 1915.<sup>61</sup> The nine enlisted men (including Sidney) were well known throughout the town and referred to collectively as the "Craigmyle boys." All nine of the "Craigmyle boys" were hospitalized at least once during the war and two were killed.<sup>62</sup> Many of these injuries and deaths were reported in the *Munson Mail* and subsequently read or heard by both children and adults.<sup>63</sup> This community news provided young children, like the Brooks, with a clear understanding of the connection between war, mutilation, disease, and death.

In the face of the great stress this likely caused, the Brook children were often expected to act cheerfully. Wartime propaganda overtly suggested children should be happy, kind, and hardworking in order to be something "worth fighting for."<sup>64</sup> This

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<sup>60</sup> Kristine Moruzi, "'A Very Cruel Thing': Canadian Children, the First World War, and the *Grain Growers Guide*," in *Children's Literature and Culture of the First World War*, ed. Rosemary Ross Johnston Lissa Paul, and Emma Short, 214-225, (New York: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>61</sup> "Population Data 1915," Alberta, Municipal Population Lists, [www.municipalaffairs.gov.ab.ca/mc\\_official\\_populations](http://www.municipalaffairs.gov.ab.ca/mc_official_populations)

<sup>62</sup> Isabelle wrote that all of the Craigmyle boys were injured at least once: "It made me think (when I heard Mr. L. was coming) of what you wrote last spring – all the Craigmyle boys had seen the hospital but you. You were the last." GA, Isabelle Brook to Sidney Brook, January 25, 1918.

<sup>63</sup> A few examples from the paper include: "Local Round Up" *Munson Mail*, December 6, 1917; July 12, 1917; May 3, 1917, April 26, 1917.

<sup>64</sup> Alexander, "An Honour and a Burden," 175.

framing suggests that boys could maintain strong connections with their father by “being good.” The Brook children also felt pressure to behave directly from Sidney. For example, he asked Isabelle if the boys were “very troublesome? Hope they’re good boys? They’ll have to be if they want me to come + live with them.”<sup>65</sup> Pleasing their fathers and living up to these idealized images meant that children had to perform emotion work by hiding negative emotions like sadness, fear, or anger.<sup>66</sup>

Being “good boys” also meant helping around the house. Gordon and Arnott regularly dropped off and picked up the family’s mail, did the shopping, brought in pails of water, went to the neighbours to pick up milk, and tended to the younger children. Even four-year-old Lorne occasionally brought in the mail and helped Isabelle in the garden.<sup>67</sup> Gordon and Arnott also helped the neighbour’s level the floor in the new cellar then empty it bucket by bucket after it flooded. Sidney was “very pleas[ed] to hear that Gordon and Arnott [were] such good errand boys” and wished “they could have a soldiers suit apiece.”<sup>68</sup> The work that they boys performed to live up to the idealized images of children who were “worth fighting for” can be read as work that they boys did to please their father and therefore remain connected to him.

#### Brothers: Gordon and Arnott

Thus far, this chapter has examined how Isabelle, Sidney, and the boys worked together to maintain their family’s emotional bonds while physically separated. Within

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<sup>65</sup> GA, Sidney Brook to Isabelle Brook, July 8, 1917.

<sup>66</sup> Kristine Alexander and Ashley Henrickson, “Children, Soldiers, and Letter-Writing in Canada’s First World War.”

<sup>67</sup> GA, Isabelle Brook to Sidney Brook, April 25, 1917.

<sup>68</sup> GA, Sidney Brook to Isabelle Brook, August 2, 1916.

this complex web, the Brook children also supported one another, especially Gordon and Arnott. Like the siblings examined in the last chapter, the boys had a strong emotional bond, they often worked together to cross the distances created by the war and remain connected with their father. In addition to performing chores as a team, they also made candy for Sidney and wrapped his parcels together. The letters they sent Sidney were written on the same day, suggesting that they might have sat together at the table and wrote them together under Isabelle's guidance. Isabelle highlighted their close partnerships by constantly referring to them as "the boys" (even though she has two other male children).<sup>69</sup>

The strong relationship between Gordon and Arnott is especially clear in the letters Isabelle wrote after Arnott's death in 1917. Arnott came home sick from school on October 5 and remained in bed for several weeks before passing away on October 24. Isabelle described the family's grief in her letters to Sidney, telling him that there are "so many things around to remind one of him. His clothes, school bag, scrap-book etc."<sup>70</sup> She explained that Gordon was especially saddened to lose Arnott, as the two boys "were like a little team." Further, she explained that "one did not go to bed before the other."<sup>71</sup> Closing her letter by telling Sidney that "Gordon is wanting me to go upstairs with him. It's past his bedtime and he never wants to go off to bed himself now, without me going upstairs with him."<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> GA, Isabelle Brook to Sidney Brook, July 7, 1916; October 23, 1916; September 19, 1916; November 22, 1916; December 15, 1916; January 9, 1917.

<sup>70</sup> GA, Isabelle Brook to Sidney Brook, October 29, 1917.

<sup>71</sup> GA, Isabelle Brook to Sidney Brook, October 29, 1917.

<sup>72</sup> GA, Isabelle Brook to Sidney Brook, November 4, 1917.

This grief that Gordon felt during this period was likely compounded with anxiety as his father had been hit in the arm with shrapnel and was recovering in England in the weeks following Arnott's death. Further, the same sore throat that killed Arnott was spreading and had infected two of Gordon's classmates.<sup>73</sup> Inside Gordon's own home, the illness continued, as the doctor was called three times to check on his younger brother Lorne, and his mother was forced to spend many days in bed recovering from diphtheria. Gordon himself was also sick and missed nearly five weeks of school. While Isabelle was sick, she wrote relatively few letters, making it difficult to piece together Gordon's and the other children's experiences during this period. However, it is clear that Gordon — who saw Arnott and a younger brother Walter pass away in his home — had a very clear understanding of death. This challenges the conclusions of historians, such as Collin Ross, who argue that children in the First World War could not relate to death and were instead drawn to simple symbols of patriotism, such as flags and music.<sup>74</sup> The Brook children's vivid understanding of war and death suggests that they were not as distant from the violence of the front lines as Ross suggests.

#### Papa's Babies

If Gordon's, Arnott's and Lorne's inability to read and write created distance between themselves and Sidney, then Glen's and Alice's inability to speak was clearly a large barrier. Glen was two years old when his father left in 1916, and Alice was born shortly after his departure. Relatively little research has examined the wartime

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<sup>73</sup> GA, Isabelle Brook to Sidney Brook, October 29, 1917.

<sup>74</sup> Collin Ross, *Children, War and Propaganda* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), 270.

experiences of young children (under the age of five), like Glen and Alice, in the past or present.<sup>75</sup> Isabelle's letters provide us with some insight into Glen's and Alice's wartime lives; however her descriptions of them are far less detailed than her descriptions of Gordon, Arnott, and Lorne, likely because Glen and Alice did not express their emotions verbally to Isabelle as eloquently as the older children.

In her letters, Isabelle pointed out a key difference between Glen and his older siblings as she openly told Sidney that Glen would not remember him; however, she optimistically added that it would not take "long till he was having a big time" playing with his father, after he returned. Isabelle also told Sidney that Glen often said "Papa", but she did not don't "how much he means of it, or knows about it."<sup>76</sup> It appears that many young children, like Glen, felt an "ambiguous sense of loss" as they struggled to understand where their fathers had gone and when they would return, especially in the months shortly after their father departed.<sup>77</sup> It is interesting to note than Glen continued to talk about his "Papa" in the months and years after Sidney's physical departure. This could suggest that the many strategies that the family used to make Sidney's presence felt in their home minimized the distance between Glen and his father, helping to keep Sidney's memory alive in Glen's mind.

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<sup>75</sup> For a discussion about why the experiences of young children are understudied in a historical context see: Stearns, Peter. "Challenges in the History of Childhood." *The Journal of History of Childhood and Youth* 1(1) (2008), 35-42; in a contemporary context: Joy Osofsky, and Chartrand Molinda, "Military Children from Birth to Five Years." *The Future of Children* 23/ 2 (2013): 61-77.

<sup>76</sup> GA, Isabelle Brook to Sidney Brook, May 13, 1917.

<sup>77</sup> Pauline Boss, *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000), adapted to examine children in the First World War by: Kristine Alexander and Ashley Henrickson, "Children, Soldiers, and Letter-Writing in Canada's First World War."

Sidney was eager to minimize the great distance between himself and his new daughter; he often asked Isabelle about her. Shortly after she was born, he was eager to receive a photograph. He asked, "Do you suppose it possible to get a photo (not larger than an envelope) of yourself and Alice? Try, will you?"<sup>78</sup> After receiving the photo, he remarked, "Now I have the joyous experience of looking at the pictures of my wife + children. I really believe Alice is good looking."<sup>79</sup> Throughout the war, Sidney gave special mention to Alice when he signed off his letters to the family, often saying things like, "Please give each of those dear little boys a kiss... and I think Alice May should have two kisses" or "Love and kisses to each + a double portion to Alice."<sup>80</sup> When Sidney was reunited with his family in 1918 the letters stop, preventing historians from knowing how the children, including Glen and Alice, reacted to their father's return. It is likely that the family continued to face challenges as it would take time to cross the two years worth of distance that had been created by the war.

### The Lavers

In their totality, the Brooks' wartime letters suggest that the family was successful speaking across the great challenges they faced. There are no obvious fights and the family waited eagerly for Sidney's return. This was, of course, not the case for all families. Isabelle's letters provide insight into the Lavers family, who had a very different experience of distance, one which was layered with frustration, fears, and poor communication. Isabelle and her family knew the Lavers family prior to the war, and

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<sup>78</sup> GA, Sidney Brook to Isabelle Brook, January 23, 1917.

<sup>79</sup> GA, Sidney Brook to Isabelle Brook, May 3, 1917.

<sup>80</sup> GA, Sidney Brook to Isabelle Brook, July 11, 1917.

Frank Lavers served with Sidney from 1916 until he was he returned to Canada in January 1918 due to carbuncles (boils) on his neck. Frank often spoke with Sidney on the Western Front, and Florence Lavers and her children – Julius (b. 1899) (referred to as Queenie in letters), Fredrick (b. 1902), Roy (b. 1906), and Richard (b. 1909) – visited Isabelle and her children in Craigmyle. Isabelle told Sidney that Florence constantly complained that her husband did not write often enough, suggesting that he preferred to keep the family “out of sight [and] out of mind.”<sup>81</sup> Florence also compared the number of letters that she received to the number of letters Isabelle received. She commented that the small postcards Isabelle received were “just a little note but it shows he thinks of you – and – my husband doesn’t think of me.”<sup>82</sup> Isabelle’s letters also suggest that Frank and Florence fought in many of the letters that they did exchange. Isabelle explained that Florence gave her husband a “scorching,” as she could “just rip it up when she’s writing.”<sup>83</sup> Fred was also unhappy with this communication and complained about his wife in a letter to the Golds, another family in the Craigmyle community, who let Isabelle read the letter they received from Frank.<sup>84</sup>

Throughout the letters, Isabelle suggested that the strained communication caused Florence great stress, which was clearly visible to her children. “[Florence] keeps declaring she isn’t going to live long,” Isabelle told Sidney. “She tells [her children] she’s sure she can’t [live long], and feel as she does. Complaints of her heart and breath

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<sup>81</sup> GA, Isabelle Brook to Sidney Brook, July 4, 1916.

<sup>82</sup> GA, Isabelle Brook to Sidney, November 4, 1916.

<sup>83</sup> GA, Isabelle Brook to Sidney, July 4, 1916.

<sup>84</sup> GA, Isabelle Brook to Sidney, March 2, 1917.



troubling her. And making all allowances for the lady as we know her, I really think she is sick.”<sup>85</sup> Isabelle further suggested that it was difficult for seventeen-year-old Queenie to see her mother in such distress and that the children felt “neglected” by their father. The children were further brought into their parents’ miscommunications when Florence sent her children to ask Isabelle if Sidney had sent any letters when their own father had not. This task would likely have made it very clear to the children that the Brooks’ father sent far more letters than their own.

Although Isabelle’s description of the Lavers family is second-hand, it is likely that she provided Sidney with an accurate account of the Lavers’ issues. The letter Frank wrote to the Golds verifies Isabelle’s claims that Frank was unhappy with his marital communication. Further, Isabelle knew that Frank and Sidney spoke on the Western Front, so it seems unlikely that she would “make up” the strained relationship, as Sidney could easily validate this information with Frank. Isabelle may have exaggerated the Lavers’ communication difficulties because she regularly juxtaposed the Lavers’ poor wartime communication with her own family’s more stable contact. By exaggerating the Lavers’ difficulties communicating, she may have been attempting to make her own communication seem more impressive. Isabelle’s letters regarding the Lavers are interesting because they provide a description of a family who were unable to effectively communicate across the many distances created by the First World War. This story is rarely preserved in the historical record, likely because families who did not live

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<sup>85</sup> GA, Isabelle Brook to Sidney Brook, February 16, 1917.

up to images of ideal supportive families were less likely to hold onto the letter or donate them to archives.

The Brook letters provide unique insights into the wartime challenges they faced, as they had to speak across the distance created by their physical separation and the children's low literacy. The family drew on a plethora of strategies to maintain their relationships during this period. The children performed some of these strategies indirectly as they added intimacy and meaning to their relationships with Sidney by interacting with an image of him; imaging what he would do if he were home, talking about him or treasuring the letters and gifts he sent. The family also worked together to overcome the distance created by the children's inability to read, as Isabelle worked as translator for her children.

## Conclusion

It seemed fitting to conclude this thesis with a letter written from the trenches on or shortly after November 11, 1918. However, by the time the armistice was signed, six of the soldiers in this study — Aubrey Bell, George Redman, Leslie Redman, George Lamb, William Bell and Hadden Ellis — had been killed; Gordon MacKay was injured and already back in Canada; Russell Redman was still underage; and Raymond Bell and Sidney Brook were recovering in England; meaning that none of them were near the front lines, a sad reality that harshly speaks to the longevity of the war and its horrific toll.

Before soldiers such as Aubrey, or children such as Arnott, were permanently distanced from their family through death, they worked to speak across many forms of distance. Most obviously, the limited communication technology available in the early twentieth century created a temporal distance. Contemporary Canadian families separated by war do not experience this distance in the same way, as technologies such as Skype and instant messaging provide near instance communication between Canada and foreign conflict zones. Although this distance has been shortened, it is not gone. Contemporary families receive regular updates from their loved ones at the end of the day or when soldiers have free time. This communication is delayed compared to the nearly instant and constant updates from reporters and civilians on social media.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Talya Greene, Joshua Buckman, Christopher Dandeker, Neil Greenberg, "How Communication with Families can both Help and Hinder Service Members' Mental Health and Occupational Effectiveness on Deployment," *Military Medicine*, 175/10 (2010): 746.

Therefore contemporary families also receive news of the war's general progress before hearing from their loved ones; however, the distance between the two messages has greatly diminished. Although the temporal distance between reading about a major attack and hearing from loved ones is only a few hours, these hours would likely feel like an immense amount of time and distance.

The divide between families in the First World War was also furthered by differing wartime experiences, as soldiers saw and participated in horrific events their civilian families did not. Many historians have argued that families could not communicate across this distance. Conversely, this thesis builds on the work of social historians, such as Joanna Bourke, Kristine Alexander, Michael Roper, Tim Cook, and Helen McCartney, by demonstrating that families drew on many strategies to speak across the division caused by their differing wartime experiences.<sup>2</sup> In addition to overcoming these challenges, the Brook family had to address the distance created by their young children's illiteracy. Isabelle helped her family communicate across this distance by acting as translator. The family also worked together to make Sidney's presence felt in their home, preventing him from becoming a distant memory in the boys' minds. Not all families were able to remain as closely connected as the Brooks. Both the Lavers family and George and Lilian Lamb struggled to communicate

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<sup>2</sup> Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies and the Great War* (London: Reaktin Books, 1996); Kristine Alexander, "An Honour and a Burden: Canadian Girls and the Great War," in *A Sisterhood of Suffering and Service: Women and Girls of Canada and Newfoundland During the First World War*, ed. Sarah Glassford, 173-194 (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2012); Michael Roper, *The Secret Battle: Emotional Survival in the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University, 2010); Tim Cook, *Shock Troops: Canadians Fighting the Great War, 1917-1918*; Helen McCartney, *Citizen Soldiers: The Liverpool Territorials in the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

effectively. Their hardships demonstrate that the bonds between families are not automatically self-sustaining and that communication is difficult. Impressively, the other families in this study could speak across the many differences they faced and maintain strong and supportive communication.

By examining the experiences of these families, historians can gain a better understanding of wartime, and of family relationships in the early twentieth century more broadly. The loving and jovial connections between brothers and sisters, examined in chapter two, were likely continuations of pre-war relationships, not unique bonds that materialized when young men enlisted. The close connection between Gordon and Arnott demonstrates how these connections could form in early childhood. The ways in which brothers and sisters kept each other informed about their love lives also provide insight into their unique relationships and mirrors Leonore Davidoff's findings that British youth in the early twentieth century often played an important role in their siblings' romantic relationships.<sup>3</sup> Isabelle's letters also provide insight into the ways that Gordon, Arnott and Lorne interacted with their baby sister; they minded her while Isabelle was busy, taught her new words, and held her. This insight is especially interesting because this maternal behaviour was performed by young boys; of course, this situation may have been different if the Brook children had an older sister. The Brook's wartime letters also highlight the loving relationship between Sidney and his children, which aligns with the finding of numerous scholars who suggest that Edwardian

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<sup>3</sup> Leonore Davidoff, *Thicker than Water: Siblings and their relations, 1780-1920* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) 134.

fathers were affectionate towards their children.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Isabelle's letters suggest that the boys loved and missed their father.

By isolating "young" soldiers (unmarried and under the age of twenty-five) from their older counterparts and examining how they interacted with their youthful sisters, this thesis also demonstrates the unique space these young men occupied. The letters they wrote to their sisters provide insight into the ways they navigated dating and distance and the ways they embraced — or sometimes shunned — "masculine" activities, like gambling, drinking, and violence. Soldiers also spoke about many of these activities in letters to their mothers and fathers. However, soldiers spoke about them in more depth with their equally young sisters.

Like many studies about young people, this examination provides an avenue to rethink what agency looks like.<sup>5</sup> The ways in which children and young women worked to maintain their relationships may not look like stereotypical examples of agency; however, these young people were clearly making choices and taking actions to reach their goals. Importantly, although they acted with agency, they were not necessarily acting independently; the Brook children were supported by their mother, father, and each other. Similarly, young adults like Marjorie Bell worked within a complex network of family and community members on the homefront and warfront.

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<sup>4</sup> Julie-Marie Strange, "Fatherhood, Providing, and Attachment in Late Victorian and Edwardian Working-Class Families," *The Historical Journal* 55/4 (2012): 1007-1027; Stephen M. Frank, *Life with Father: Parenthood and masculinity in the nineteenth-century American North* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); Megan Doolittle, "Fatherhood, religious belief and the protection of children in nineteenth-century English families," in *Gender and Fatherhood in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Trev Lynn Broughton and Helen Rogers, 31-42 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Steven Mintz, "Why the history of childhood matters," *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 5/1 (2012): 17.

These findings about the past have interesting implications in the present. Although contemporary families have far faster and more advanced communication tools – such as instant messaging and Skype – they still face many of the same challenges as families during the First World War. Scholars and military officials often debate the “ideal” amount and type of communication soldiers should have with their families. Some argue that communication with home is good for soldiers’ mental health, while others worry that too much communication will adversely affect unit cohesion, and morale.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, scholars suggest that “too much” communication with family members causes soldiers to become stressed and distracted because they hear about problems at home, which they cannot fix from a distance.<sup>7</sup> Although modern and historical conflicts and families differ greatly, some broad conclusions can still be drawn from this study to contribute to these contemporary debates. Namely, communication with family members at home was good for soldiers in the First World War. It provided them with emotional support and reminded them of past happiness and future hope. Further, by today’s standards, these soldiers had very limited communication with their families, and this communication was highly delayed; however, they still thought and worried about their families constantly, suggesting that correlation between communicating with families and worrying about them, may not be as straightforward as assumed.

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<sup>6</sup> For an overview of these debates see: Tayla Greene, Joshua Buckman, Christopher Dandeker, and Neil Greenberg, “How communication with families can both help and hinder service members' mental health and occupational effectiveness on deployment,” *Military Medicine*, 175/10 (2010): 745-749.

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Warner, Jill Breitbart, George Appenzeller, Virginia Yates, “Division Mental Health in the New Brigade Combat Team Structure: Part I. Predeployment and deployment,” *Military Medicine* 172/9 (2007): 907 – 11.

When the armistice was finally signed in 1918, Ivy Redman was twenty-five years old. During the war, she passed her nursing exam, saw four brothers off to war, and mourned the loss of two. She had also written and received hundreds of letters and mailed countless parcels with sweaters, socks, tobacco, and sweets. In return, her brothers sent her an array of gifts, including a button George “cut off a dead German” and a rosary he “took” out of an old church.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the most precious gift George sent her were the hundreds of flimsy, tattered, handwritten pages, which have now outlived him by a hundred years. The humour, love, fear, and sadness captured in these letters can help historians better understand George and Ivy’s wartime experiences and relationship. In particular, George’s letters speak to the immense distances that separated them and brings to light the numerous strategies they employed to overcome this distance.

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<sup>8</sup> CLIP, George Redman to Ivy Redman, January 19, 1917.



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[www.municipalaffairs.gov.ab.ca/mc\\_official\\_populations](http://www.municipalaffairs.gov.ab.ca/mc_official_populations)

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