

“YOU YOURSELF ARE HERE NOW LOOKING OVER MY SHOULDER AS I WRITE”: EMOTIONAL DIALOGUE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF A SHARED INTIMATE SPACE IN FIRST WORLD WAR LETTERS

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1. The First World War was a time when public events inserted themselves brutally into the private emotional lives of its participants. While it is difficult to access individual emotions from a particular historical time because these cannot be documented in any objective quantitative or material way, and reside primarily in subjective documents such as diaries and letters, exchanges of wartime letters between couples do offer a way of considering how, in this particularly fraught context, individuals expressed emotion in writing as they attempted to transcend extreme physical and experiential separation. The language of letters exchanged between couples during the war thus admits us into what might otherwise be an unavailable emotional world, and offers insight into both the subjective experience of war and how individuals share and express emotion. As Martha Hanna writes in her discussion of French correspondence during the First World War:

Simultaneously dialogical and intimate, [letters] alone show how men and women shared their experiences of war, drew emotional sustenance from one another, and in the process transcended the gender divide imposed by war.¹

When letters become what Hanna calls an “intersecting” space that men and women inhabit simultaneously², they create a shared narrative wherein we find their writers attempting to transcend the confines of place and of linear time imposed on them by wartime separation.

2. Millions of letters were exchanged on all fronts during the war, but they have received little attention outside their use as source information or as vehicles for the psychological and emotional analysis of the combatant experience. Hanna’s analyses of French wartime letters referred to above, and Christa Hämmerle’s examination of German/Austro-Hungarian letters are important contributions to the ongoing conversations about wartime life-writings, but so far there has been no

¹ M. Hanna. ‘A Republic of Letters’, 3.

² M. Hanna. *Your Death Would be Mine*, 24.

examination of shared British correspondence that gives equal attention to the women's letters, and none that looks specifically at the emotional exchange between young couples which is the primary focus of this article³. In redressing the lack of attention given to such letter exchanges, this article focuses on a specific form of letters: those written by heterosexual British couples as they forged a romantic relationship, primarily over the course of their separation when the man went to the front. The emotional exchanges in these letters offer ways of reconsidering relationships between men and women during the war as they have been and continue to be interpreted, particularly in terms of the gap in understanding between those at home and those at the front. They bear out what Susan Matt and Peter Stearns identify as, "the potential that emotions history has for rewriting traditional narratives"⁴. The correspondence analysed here belongs to what Matt and Stearns would call an "articulate group", as published and unpublished collections come primarily from middle and upper middle class men and women, and this limits the conclusions which can be drawn from such a study. However, since there are a limited number of correspondences where letters from both sides are available⁵, their consideration is important for what they have to tell us about the emotional experience of a very particular period in history.

3. Of the letters discussed here, those between Muriel Harpin and Charles 'Neville' Overton, Cyril Newman and Winifred Blackburn, Frederic Sellers and Grace Malin, and William Wooliscroft and Lily Patrick are in unpublished collections in the Imperial War Museum, London. These collections contain little or no biographical information outside the letters themselves, though a note in the Newman-Blackburn letters says that Newman had them typed and collated for their children after Blackburn's death⁶. The letters between Marjorie Secretan and Toby Dodgson and between Marjorie and Charles Fair are part of a much larger collection of First World War correspondence between four connected families edited by the son and grandson of Marjorie and Charles Fair. Marjorie and Toby Dodgson had been friends before the war. They fell in love in 1915 and were

³ My article on the wartime relationship between Vera Brittain and Roland Leighton draws on their letters as part of a larger examination of Brittain's use of wartime discourses: 'Writing and Waiting: The First World War Correspondence between Vera Brittain and Roland Leighton', *Gender and History*.

⁴ S. J. Matt and P. N. Stearns, 'Introduction' to *Doing Emotions History*, 11.

⁵ Matt and Stearns, 'Introduction', *Doing Emotions History*, 5.

⁶ Muriel Harpin and Charles 'Neville' Overton correspondence, Private Papers, Department of Documents, Imperial War Museum (30/5/1); Cyril Newman and Winifred Blackburn correspondence, Private Papers, Department of Documents, Imperial War Museum (03/5/1); Frederick Sellers and Grace Malin correspondence, Private Papers, Department of Documents, Imperial War Museum (09/32/1); William Wooliscroft, Private Papers, Department of Documents, Imperial War Museum (09/57/2).

planning their marriage when Toby was killed during the Somme Offensive in 1916. Just over a year later Marjorie became engaged to Charles Fair and they married soon after. He survived the war⁷. Those between Dora Willatt and Cecil Slack were edited by someone external to the family for a small local press. Cecil had previously published a memoir, *Grandfather's Adventures in the Great War*, but this did not bring both sides of the correspondence together. The couple had known each other since they were both about seven years old and had grown up in the same middle-class social circle. Willatt had not considered Slack as other than a friend until his proposal to her during his leave from the Western Front in May of 1916. From this point onwards their letters document their growing relationship, enhanced on occasions when Cecil returned home on leave. They married in September 1919⁸. The letters between David Taylor and May Muggridge were published by a small press. Much of Muggridge's side of the correspondence with Taylor is from his period in a prisoner of war camp. As noted in his correspondence to her, many of her earlier letters to him were destroyed by him at the front because he could not carry them with him. They appear to be already engaged at the time of the first letter between them in the collection, when Muggridge writes to Taylor in February 1917. They married in April 1919. The correspondence was discovered in their house when it was inherited by their granddaughter⁹. Vera Brittain's correspondence with Roland Leighton who would become her fiancé in September 1915, her war diary and her postwar memoir, *Testament of Youth*, are the best known and most widely available of the exchanges. Her published letters and those in her archives include exchanges with and between Leighton, her brother and two other male friends¹⁰.

4. In spite of their limitations, such as the lack of some portions of correspondence and the fact that of all the couples only two are not from within the upper middle-class – Newman and Blackburn can be considered lower middle-class and Wooliscroft and Lily Patrick do not fit an easy definition of class and could be defined as middle or lower-middle class – the letters examined here do allow us to enter, through their emotional content, a very specific expression of the subjective experience of war. They reveal, often with a great deal of candour, how these men and women expressed their need and longing for each other, as well as allowing the reader to gain an

⁷ R. H. Fair and C. S. Fair, eds. *Marjorie's War*.

⁸ A. Wilkinson, ed., 'Thank God I'm Not a Boy'. Further information and archival material is available at this website: <http://www.eriding.net/worldinconflict/cecilslack/>

⁹ A. K. Hargreaves, comp. and ed., *My Dearest*.

¹⁰ V. Brittain, *Testament of Youth*.

understanding of the larger context of the war at home and at the front. Christa Hämmerle's comments on a collection of more than a hundred letters between a young Austro-Hungarian couple, are equally pertinent to this analysis of the British experience:

Under these restricted circumstances [mobilisation of young men to the military and the front] they [all the individuals involved in fighting in all countries] tried to make sense of the new geography of the front and of home, to exchange their experiences of war, and to express feelings of love and longing, of fear and concern for the well-being of the other, regardless of whether they had engaged in such private correspondence before the outbreak of the war. In the crisis of war letters became a part of everyday life.¹¹

This new physical geography, which created a new spatial and gendered order arranged in terms of home and front, importantly allows us to engage with an inner geography, so that we enter what Higonnet and Higonnet call the "private domain and landscape of the mind"¹².

5. To explore how letters allow us into this private emotional domain which challenges the physical geographical separation dictated by a state at war, this examination of these exchanges focuses on how intense connections were forged and sustained in spite of distance and transformative experiences on both sides. In constructing this shared intimacy, the letters admit us into the very particular private space of those on whom the war had the greatest impact. While these are intimate conversations, the voices we hear in them collapse time, bringing us into the daily lived experience of the generation who carried the burden of the war. The close relationships that develop during the course of the correspondence allow these individuals to express their immediate feelings about their situations and about the war. In doing so, they reveal a much more nuanced response to the war and to gendered expectations than historical studies often portray. Especially, the discussion in this article will show how the shared space that the letters themselves become, and the shared imaginative space that the writers create in these letters, is important in contesting the home/front and female/male binaries through which the war is often represented. When the letters are read as *exchanges* they further counter the privileging of *letters from the front*, through which the subjective experience of the war has historically been read: where the home front voice is excluded, we lose the experience that is revealed through shared confidences and companionate conversation. Hämmerle reminds us that:

¹¹ C. Hämmerle. "‘You let a weeping woman call you home?’ Private correspondences during the First World War in Germany', 153.

¹² M. R. Higonnet and P. L.R. Higonnet. 'The Double Helix', 46.

[t]he innovative social-historical contributions to an individual-orientated history of war based on wartime correspondence, which increasingly defines itself as ‘military history from below’, has tended to focus on reconstructing the male experience and interpretation of war. In so doing, this approach perpetuates the hegemony of male-oriented correspondence ‘from the front’ which was celebrated during the First World War and afterwards in popular memory. This is all the more unfortunate as the essential significance of wartime correspondence becomes clear only when one is able to appreciate equally and simultaneously the roles of both sides in the dialogue of the sexes. When it is viewed in the proper context of the history of gender, men’s and women’s wartime correspondence reveals their mutual dependence and the interconnectedness of differing modes of perception and experience. (157)

6. Furthermore, by excluding the other voice that drives the exchange, privileging of the combatant side of the exchange omits a crucial aspect of the interpretation – that is, that letters are always written for an addressee. They are not diaries, but dialogues. As Sonia Cancian asserts, the impetus behind the confession to the addressee may arise out of a psychological need to work through the experience as part of a conversation:

Within contexts of distress, such as war [...] letter writing also served a fundamental purpose in generating among writers an opportunity to understand, accept, and explain to themselves the difficult painful situations they were experiencing in the moment.¹³

Their content is governed by the writer’s desire to meet the needs or perceived needs of the recipient and to anticipate a compassionate response. This is, of course, crucially important in the case of *love* letters, since their very existence relies on the response of the person to whom they are addressed, and their content is directed by this response.

7. In this context, these letters are crucially important in highlighting the inaccuracy of Paul Fussell’s claim that wartime letters not only failed to bridge the gap between home and front, but that they in fact exacerbated it, offering a false version of the trench experience for those at home:

Clearly, any historian would err badly who relied on letters for factual testimony about the war. [...] Ironically, the reticence which originated in the writer’s sympathy for the feelings of their addressees was destined in the long run to widen the chasm of incomprehension which opened between them.¹⁴

Fussell here fails to take into consideration that emotions cannot be divorced from “factual testimony”, since this experience cannot exist outside the emotions that attend it. Margaretta Jolly also suggests that letters may offer an inaccurate representation of experience in that “they are in

¹³ S. Cancian. *Families, Lovers, and their Letters*, 11.

¹⁴ P. Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 183.

themselves likely to be imbued with patriotic feeling and personal reassurance”, which would suggest that public prescriptions of emotions in wartime are not contested¹⁵. While the letters examined here do at times try to reassure the non-combatant reader, they more often confront the possibility of death or injury, and the closest we come to patriotic feeling is in statements that affirm the man’s position as doing his duty and no more. In fact, in reading a range of letters, we find that writers at the front often mock the euphemistic type of account that avoids describing the harshness of the experience, and instead detail the almost unbearable conditions and daily hardship, and express revulsion at the war and a desire to return home alongside descriptions of their daily existence.

8. War letters are much more than a cataloguing of events or material contexts, however; they also focus on exchanges of thoughts and ideas, express love, and give news about friends and family and the minutiae of life. Like love letters generally, they focus more on feelings than on the material reality of everyday life, although the material reality may at times be used to convey feeling. Crucially, they offer a place to escape the material, for both sides of the correspondence. Arising out of the kind of honesty and openness that came to exist between individuals who were close friends and lovers, the intimacy these writers forge means that, in spite of censorship, combatants’ representation of their conditions is presented through the prism of their emotional response to these conditions. The correspondence under study certainly gives no indication that the woman at home is to be protected from knowing the facts of daily existence (although the women themselves often acknowledge their inability to imagine the situation fully). Similarly, the woman at home brings her combatant interlocutor into the daily domestic world and the world of work, detailing frustrations and mundane minutiae alongside more intimate and romantic expressions of longing, assured that the seemingly mundane is important to him because it allows him to participate in the world of home, rather than being seen as inconsequential in the face of his extreme experience.

9. Rather than signifying a gap in understanding as Fussell suggests then, a reading of these letters affirms Esther Milne’s comments on letters more generally, that “for many correspondents 'absence' [...] opens a discursive space in which desires that might not otherwise be articulated can be explored.”¹⁶ In expressing such desires, which go well beyond the sexual desire for the

¹⁵ M. Jolly. ‘Myths of Unity’, 148. Jolly goes on to note that “Fussell and others have for that reason viewed them as the least conducive material for charting the real experience of war.”

¹⁶ E. Milne, *Letters, Postcards, Email*, 52.

correspondent to include the wish to return home to work, comfort, and the company of family and friends, letter exchanges challenge the wartime status quo that relies on gendered constructions of behaviour where masculinity and femininity are determined by the spaces men and women occupy: front and home. Importantly, the “intersecting world” which these conversations inhabit is arguably a subversive site, in that they often reveal, especially on the part of the soldier, a rejection of the masculine combatant role and instead a preoccupation with the domestic. It is the way these individuals manage the “interconnectedness” of that “intersecting world” in their correspondence that challenges both wartime assumptions of gendered space and the historical assumptions of writers such as Fussell noted earlier, which persist in spite of challenges to this position¹⁷. Even where those challenges have been made, they have primarily been used to analyse combatant emotions rather than examining both sides of the correspondence. The discussion here, on the contrary, will focus on how individuals create intimacy across a range of correspondences. As these myriad letters defy years of enforced separation by maintaining connection through constant letter writing – in several cases correspondents wrote almost every day where possible- so through them these writers also defy their relegation to state induced geographies of home and front.

10. As we move into a more specific analysis of the letters, we can see that it is not just that the front is brought to the woman at home and home to the man at the front, in fact the intimate space created through the language of emotion at the same time functions to bring women into the front and men into the domestic space of home. This works imaginatively as they conjure up each other’s presence, but also practically. Men writing from the front engage in giving advice about domestic or work issues. William Wooliscroft, for example, maintains a role in his business by having Lily Patrick send him the accounts and he advises her on the right time to buy animals for their butchering business¹⁸. Much of Cecil Slack’s exchange with Dora Willatt is to do with advising and supporting her in her concerns at home, for example her desire to defy her parents and become a volunteer nurse, but, crucially for our focus here, he also places her with him at the front in language that is central to our understanding of how these men and women overcame state imposed separation: “You yourself are here now looking over my shoulder as I write. I can feel you there.”

¹⁷ John Horne, for example, argues for the importance of letters as “a means of exploring representations of combat and of mapping both public and private responses to the disparity between anticipated mode of battle and the realities of trench warfare.” ‘Soldiers, Civilians and the Warfare of Attrition: Representations of Combat in France 1014-1918’, 225. Michael Roper explores how crucial exchanges of letters between home and front were for emotional survival at the front, noting the “emotional significance of home for the trench soldier.” M. Roper. *The Secret Battle*, 8.

¹⁸ W. Wooliscroft, *Private Papers*.

(197) Thus, while letters paradoxically signify both presence and absence, existing because of separation (and the letters under discussion constantly refer to that separation and to frustration at the limitations of language), they also overcome separation as they construct what Milne calls “the intimacy of absence”:

The physical absence of one’s epistolary partner provides both the impetus and the “material” for a range of strategies, language uses and technological functions aimed at creating an imagined sense of presence. References to the physical body, to the scene of writing, to the place where the letter is received or to postal technology are often used by letter writers to convey and invoke a sense of immediacy, intimacy and presence. (14)

More emphatically, and particularly pertinent to this discussion, Milne argues that a

shared sense of immediacy and presence seems to be enabled, in part, by the physical distance between the interlocutors. What has been termed “the intimacy of absence” (a necessarily disembodied sense of presence) has been identified as a defining feature of epistolary communication. (55)

11. As in Slack’s letter to Willatt, these letters more generally bear out Milne’s assertion here. The shared emotion through which intimacy is developed is both carried in and takes us beyond the more obvious connections forged by the material presence of letters and parcels which will be examined later in reference to receipt of and frequency of letters, and uncensored ‘green envelopes’, for example¹⁹. The letter itself is a space in which each can openly confess desire for the other. Yet the language which express this desire may be constrained by cultural mores and by the limitations of words themselves to express feeling. As Matt argues, “[w]riters craft their journals, letters, and memoirs, presenting their feelings with an eye to social conventions or rules about feelings.²⁰” Although these writers generally seem to express their feelings candidly, as later specific examples show, in spite of the presence of a third party reader in the form of a censor or a family member, the letters take the expression of intimacy beyond language, becoming instrumental in creating private imagined spaces into which only the individual couple can enter. That is to say, while the narrative on the page tells one story, there is another that can only be shared by the writers, since it relies on their knowledge of each other, past events and private exchanges that have occurred outside the letters. This space or narrative is thus inaccessible to the external reader of the letters. What is

¹⁹ These were distributed to all troops periodically. They could seal the envelope while signing to swear that the letter contained only personal content.

²⁰ S. Matt, ‘Recovering the Invisible’.

especially evident in these collections is that, in addition to direct declarations of love or other expressions of feeling, intimacy is constructed through each writer's creation of an imagined meeting space that belongs only to the two correspondents. The shared world that they create transcends not only the physical geography of home and front, but derives from their shared sense of Milne's "disembodied sense of presence" of the "other reader". Thus, for example, Dora Willatt and Cecil Slack arrange a time, half-past ten to eleven at night, when they will both be in bed, (the only private time for either of them) when they can conjure the physical but "disembodied" presence of the other simultaneously²¹. The reference to this particular time in a letter becomes a code or shorthand for the emotion they feel. Behind the lines on 26th December 1916 Cecil Slack writes, "It is 10.45 now, part of the precious half hour. I shall go to sleep thinking of my love who is loving me just as I love her" (108). And on the 28th, "Germaine, the stove, has just gone out and it is very cold. I am alone in the mess. I am going across to my bed now, as my little watch tells me it will soon be half past ten." (109) It is perhaps noteworthy that he does not use the military twenty-four hour clock time here, but home time. On the 19th of January 1917, at the end of a day's Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) nursing, Dora Willatt concludes her letter, "I must go to bed now – it is 10.45 and I am so sleepy. I'm just going to roll in and fall asleep thinking of you, my own love." (121) The idea of telepathy may reinforce this sense of connection, affirmed when they feel the presence of the other strongly. Thus returning from leave Cecil confesses that he is "miserable" at leaving Dora "in body", but, as noted earlier, he can feel her presence "looking over my shoulder as I write." (197) Arguably, the emotion here is carried less in what he says directly than in the implied tension between absence and presence, the embodied and disembodied, that is a central characteristic of letter writing. Milne explores this connection through the concept of "simultaneity", wherein

under certain conditions, correspondents feel as if they share the same moment in time. [...]The capacity to invoke "two worlds" – the process by which reader and writer can be made to seem present to one another in the epistolary exchange – highlights another closely related concept that operates within fantasies of presence. "Simultaneity" or the sense of the shared, "virtual" presence is a significant generic property of epistolary systems. (59)

While for Cecil Slack the act of writing conjures Dora Willatt's presence, for others the presence of the loved other is aroused through a material reminder of the loved one. Just after their engagement,

²¹ A. Wilkinson, ed., "Thank God I'm Not a Boy". Where possible, throughout the discussion, I have included dates of letters as well as, in the case of published collections, the page number. Dates are an important way of marking time in war letters.

when Toby Dodgson has returned to France from leave, Marjorie Secretan writes,

Toby, your ring is just glorious. I remember so well what you said, that I could look at it and think you love me, and indeed I do; and often when the thoughts of you are pushed far away by outside things, I catch a sparkle from the little diamonds and the picture of you rushes back into memory, so insistent and so familiar that I have almost spoken to you in real life across all the miles that separate us. (24th June 1915; 35)

In September she tells him of a walk in a shared familiar place:

I climbed the hill on the other side of the wood and came round the other way, past the “brushwood pile where he first kissed her, only the brushwood has gone [. . .] All the way I gloried in the feeling that you were about somewhere and probably thinking of me. Isn't it splendid having that lovely summer behind us with its memories of all we have done and said and thought together and all the things between us “that only you remember and only I admire”” (18th September 1915; 92).²²

Moving briefly into third person narrative, the phrase “where he first kissed her” here implies that they are the subjects of their own story and thus that their story exists permanently in the place Marjorie describes. Even though the moment has passed, the place remains as a shared imaginative space that only they can enter because it relies on emotional memories that belong only to them. Such a narrative thus transcends their geographical separation, repositioning their emotional lives in a space beyond the parameters of war.

David Taylor and May Muggridge take this imagining further by constructing a fictionally playful intimacy in place of actual memories, as each relates teasing imagined encounters as if they were real. Thus David writes to May from France on May 28th 1917:

Last night was lovely.

You had your new vest on but there were no buttons on it and after I laid down as you wanted me to you insisted on cuddling my head and pressing it close to its nest. Then we got too hot so I threw the blankets etc. off and you turned your back to me and I had both arms round you, like we used to and you went to sleep like this. But later you woke up and said you wanted your cheek against mine and wanted to be held quite close against me and then you dropped off to sleep again.

This morning I woke up at 7 but you were still asleep in my arms and didn't wake up until 8.30. Then I had to get up in a hurry.²³

²² A misquotation from Robert Louis Stevenson's poem 'Romance': "That only I remember, that only you admire".

²³ A. K. Hargreaves, comp. and ed., *My Dearest*, 81.

Much of her writing to him responds with similarly teasing, amusing, and at the same time poignant, imagined scenarios, usually when she is on the train to work. Thus:

Here come the girls, so I must leave off. Give me a kiss quick. I didn't say put your moustache in my mouth. What, I shouldn't have such a big mouth! You cheeky beggar! I won't write to you anymore – today.” (14.1.18; 292)

Here the public space, the train, is set in tension with her private narrative, reinforcing for him his importance in her world. As Marjorie Secretan's remembering of place transcends the confines of war, so also May Muggridge's fictional dramatization defies their enforced separation. Later in their correspondence, in the more serious context of his survival, capture and imprisonment in a Prisoner of War (POW) camp, she moves beyond this imagined enactment, writing her first letter to Taylor after she receives news that he is no longer 'Missing' but a POW, Muggridge tells him:

You can imagine how pleased I am to be able to write again. I felt very miserable for a day or two when your letters ceased, but one night I distinctly felt your cheek against mine, so of course took heart, and knew everything would come right in the end. (9.8.17; 174)²⁴

Replying, he writes:

When your letter came I read it and re-read it until I knew it practically by heart... I think I know about the time when you felt my cheek for I tried for a long time to do it and once it seemed as though I did. (September 12th 1917; 193)

This exchange reinforces and extends the idea already discussed in the context of Dora Willatt and Cecil Slack's overcoming of distance by creating an imagined space for each other. Here, David Taylor and May Muggridge seem literally to subvert the separation exacted by the war, to the point of actually experiencing each other's physical presence:

On another occasion Muggridge comments on the limitations of imaginary conversations: So you indulge in day dreams. So did I each night, and always in the train. We have grand conversations, but they always end in one way – not *Lieder ohne Worte*, but Conversations without words. (12.11.17; 235).

One amusing consequence of her reference to him as her imaginary companion is also a reminder of the restrictions placed on correspondence with a POW:

²⁴ Two letters to David from May written on July 10th 1917 were returned marked “wounded” and “wounded and missing”. His family did not receive notification that he was in a Prisoner of War camp until August 5th. Around this time they receive the first letters from David from the camp. May's first letter to him in the camp is dated 9th August 1917. He was released sometime in December 1918. *My Dearest*, 153; 155; 499.

So a piece had been cut out of one of my letters which does not seem to have pleased you. I feel very amused, as my letters are always so full of twaddle, most of them being about “my constant companion” & me going in the train or out for walks. Needless to say the “constant companion” refers to thoughts of you. When alone I always imagine you are with me, but I suppose the censor began to think I mean some spy, and thereby have a double meaning in my innocent letters, Fancy me being so profound! It is quite complementary to think I might have so much brain. In future I will leave out reference to my constant companion, but you will know I think of you as much as ever. (4.6.18; 395)

The awareness of censorship is not always amusing, however. The knowledge of a third party reader intervenes between the intimacy yearned for between writer and recipient. Thus much earlier, in June 1917, Taylor writes angrily to Muggidge that:

All our letters in future are possibly to be censored by the colonel. [...] Apparently an officer can be trusted to censor other people's letters but can't be allowed to censor his own. How can one write as one feels knowing it is liable to be read before it leaves here. (June 22nd 1917; 121)

Having had a letter returned a week later he reflects that:

Letter writing these days is an awful thing, or perhaps, looking at it the other way on, has to be reduced to a fine art and it's no ordinary person who can write a letter [...] without much thought and consideration. [...] Till now I have been writing just the first thing that comes into my head, but now I must think over each sentence three times before sticking it down and then having done so, find that it tells you some military secret, or that I have mentioned [censored] course I shouldn't like others to read, and so have to tear the whole thing up and start again. (June 29th 1917; 128: original parenthesis)

12. This exchange over censorship reinforces letter writers' need more generally to circumvent a system that made little allowance for private emotion in a world where the personal was subordinate to the public demands of a state at war. Even the most intimate of exchanges of love must be made, paradoxically, in the context of belligerent discourse. Understanding emotional intimacy thus means looking beyond direct declarations of feeling to consider that the intimacy created through the imaginative narratives we encounter to some extent emerges in the context of censorship. It is not only the actual censor, but the anticipation of censorship that may impede intimacy or need a way of conveying feelings that is outside direct explication. However, at the same time the openness with which most of these writers express their feelings, as already noted in, for example, David Taylor's fantasy of sleeping with May Muggidge quoted earlier, suggests that the consciousness of censorship was not necessarily always uppermost when writing. In fact it would seem that creating an imagined intimate space that only the writers can access arises as much out of the desire for a

private meeting place denied them in actuality as it is a response to censorship, though these are, of course, connected. The prized 'green envelopes' that allowed for the letters contained in them to be uncensored on the signing of the writer to confirm they contained only personal information, were very much coveted and looked forward to by the recipients. However, the exchanges between Winnie Blackburn and Cyril Newman do not indicate a marked difference in tone or content between the uncensored and censored letters. In spite of this, Blackburn and Newman keep more specific reference to letters written in 'green envelopes' than any of the other correspondents. As Cyril Newman was not a commissioned officer these were probably especially prized, since all letters were censored by an officer. Arguably it is the sense of privacy they supply rather than the limitations imposed by censorship itself that is so important. On one noteworthy occasion Newman tells Blackburn that the Medical Officer has let him seal his letters before handing them over, telling him he trusts him entirely. As noted, the 'green envelope' content does not seem to differ greatly from that in regular envelopes, but does seem to address Blackburn more directly. Thus on Wed May 9th 1917 Newman writes:

How is my little Girl? I picture her in the close-aired room of a City office [...] God's sun is shining upon her glistening hair like a halo round her head. Does she know I am thinking of her? Does she know her Boy longs to take her in his arms, longs even for an hour's talk?²⁵

In August she writes:

A delightful budget arrived this morning. 2 P.Cs [postcard]written on Friday, another P.C. on Saturday a sweet letter written Saturday evening and best of all, a 'Green' uncensored letter. Oh you darling: Thank you. Thank you with all my heart." (1st August 1917)

Cyril has just returned to the Front from leave, and his next 'green envelope' letter again focuses on his image of her:

You standing on the platform at Victoria Stn., the love-light shining in eyes bedimmed with tears... You don't know, Darling, how lovely you looked then, and how I was tempted to put my arms round you and defy the world." (3rd August 1917: original ellipses)

13. Reading this description of leavetaking reminds us that it was not only writing that came under the scrutiny of an official censor, but that public behaviour was also scrutinized by others, hence the

²⁵ Cyril Newman and Winifred Blackburn correspondence, Private Papers, Department of Documents, Imperial War Museum (03/5/1) Every effort has been made to trace the copyright holders and the author and Imperial War Museums would be grateful for any information which might help to trace those whose identities or addresses are not currently known.

reluctance of many young couples to engage in a public demonstration of affection, even at the emotionally heightened moment of return from leave. Cyril's letter is regretful, but his actions were constrained out of concern for her dignity and an oblique reference in a letter suggests that on another occasion he does kiss her. The tension of such a moment is articulated by Vera Brittain in her diary account of saying goodbye to Roland Leighton in 1915:

I had made up my mind before that I would not kiss him on a crowded station, but the misery of farewell put that all out of my head and he at any rate was in a sort of despair, quite oblivious of the crowd. He stooped & kissed me passionately almost before I realised he had done it. [...] as the train began to move he pressed my hand almost violently, and drawing my face down to his, kissed me again, more passionately than ever. And I kissed him, which I had never done before, and just managed to make myself whisper "Goodbye". (August 23rd 1915)²⁶

Narratives like these reveal just how much the privacy or quasi-privacy of letters could allow for an admission of physical desire and longing that may have been difficult or impossible to express outside that space. For example, less than a month after his return from this leave, Vera Brittain tells Roland Leighton that

it is absurd that we should be so intimate in letters, & then when we are together that you should touch my hand almost as if you weren't doing it right, & I even hesitate to meet your eyes with mine.²⁷

Moreover, in a world where young women's behaviour in their relationships with men was subject to the public gaze, letter writing, in so far as it could be kept private, arguably gave couples the privacy for such expression that they would not have been permitted otherwise. At the same time, the letters show a tension between conformity and resistance to established protocols around courtship behaviour. This tension reflects how these couples participated in and changed the mores of the time, driven by the exigencies of wartime separation. Several of these exchanges allow us to explore how conversations in these letters around courtship behaviour and the privacy of letters reveal a generation rejecting what they considered out-dated restrictions on their actions. It seems possible that the intimacy developed through letters played an important role here, alongside the frustration at lengthy separation. That is, accustomed to exchanging deep emotion and confidences in the privacy of letters, these couples were reluctant to acquiesce to being denied the same level of physical privacy when the man returned on leave. Thus Grace Malin is very annoyed and upset by

²⁶ V. Brittain. *Chronicle of Youth*, 332.

²⁷ A. Bishop and M. Bostridge, eds., *Letters from a Lost Generation*, 167.

comments from a friend who suggests that she and her fiancé Frederic Sellers should have a chaperone when they spend time together in London on his leave:

She certainly did think it 'improper'... The last shot was what would I do if anyone had seen me – I did feel rather wild then and it was rather hard not to let fly but I just said I didn't care if everyone on earth saw me! (Mon 19th June 1917)²⁸

Sellers replies caustically, "I hate her petty remarks... I wonder if she had ever thought of anything that somebody else hasn't already told her." (24th June 1917)

14. Although letters do appear to have offered this private space for emotional exchange for the most part, the expectation of a chaperon intervening to prevent what might be considered inappropriate intimacy between a young middle-class couple could extend to letters; where once a young woman writing to a young man might have been requested to let her parents read her letters, these wartime exchanges seem to have been considered private by their writers. This may reflect the more general move towards autonomy for young women precipitated by the war²⁹. How letters themselves are perceived is thus indicative of changing social values, especially conflicting expectations of parental control. As a nurse at a military convalescent hospital, Muriel Harpin has already established some independence from her family when on an evening off she interrupts the flow of her letter to Neville Overton to say "I find Papa has been calmly reading the whole of this page (he had to ask me what the word was!) – I thought I could trust my family – I shall have to take precautions in future"³⁰. Harpin's response seems quite mild compared to Winifred Blackman's anger at her sister cited below, but nevertheless shows a determination to maintain her privacy. Other letters indicate a more emphatic reaction against prewar protocols of courtship and with it a generalised anger at the war itself. Arguably, both of these reactions are connected in being directed at the older generation. Even as the letters themselves articulate how difficult it was to sustain a relationship through letters, it is the closeness of the relationships created in the letters that

²⁸ Frederic Sellers and Grace Malin correspondence, excerpts reproduced by kind permission of John Sellers, copyright holder.

²⁹ In her memoir of the war years, *Testament of Youth*, Vera Brittain spells out the restrictions placed on young girls conducting a romantic relationship in the early stages of the war when Edwardian values still prevailed: "There was no privacy for a boy and girl whose mutual feelings had reached their most bewildering and delicate stage; the whole series of complicated relationships leading from acquaintance to engagement had to be conducted in public or not at all. [...] Letters were observed and commented on with a lack of compunction only to be prevented by lying in wait for the postman", *Testament of Youth*, 120.

³⁰ Muriel Harpin and Charles 'Neville' Overton correspondence, excerpts reproduced by kind permission of Susan Overton, copyright holder.

allows the writers to express anger at the war and the enforced separation that has made writing a necessity. Angry that her sister Freda has been reading her letters from Cyril Newman, Winnie Blackburn records an argument with her mother who feels that she ought not to mind her sister seeing them and her comment sums up the growing generation gap created by the war:

I said to Mother: "You were never young – or have forgotten. You would not have liked aunty to have taken up the letter you were writing or a letter sent to you." And so I get into Mother's bad books. But when Father and Mother were young there was no dreadful War; she had no anxious thoughts about Father who lived merely half an hour's walk away. (12th October 1915)

Blackburn's letter also shows the frustration generated by the letter writing form itself. As noted earlier, letters represent both connection and separation. When Toby Dodgson writes to Marjorie Secretan in January 1916, we find a vehement articulation of frustration at the separation letters represent. For Dodgson, the letter itself and the limitations it places on communication is a manifestation of the absurdity of the war and what he sees as the false values it represents, especially to those at home: the idealization of masculinity in the context of combat and duty to one's country:

As for letter writing, it becomes more irksome every day. I loathe the sight of writing paper and envelopes; it's all hopelessly inadequate and clumsy... The perpetual standing about behind mud heaps and sandbags, killing time, being fatted up for the slaughter in the spring. Oh, such a fine enobling existence. (122)

Dodgson's anger illustrates what Fussell chooses to ignore, that there is a connection between feelings and factual testimony, and gendered politics, where "[c]hoosing to express or repress a feeling, choosing to obey or ignore social conventions about feelings, can be an explicitly political act³¹."

15. Although frustration at separation and the limitations of letters as a form of communication is present in all of the correspondences, writers primarily focus on overcoming those limitations. Anticipating leave about a month after the date of the letter above, imagined physical intimacy offers an escape for Dodgson from the space of the war defined as masculine and into the domestic sphere of home, defined as feminine: "it is just glorious to think of seeing you again and feeling you kissing and holding me tight in your arms. ... Oh, I'm just longing to be with you" (126). Here the letter represents connection rather than separation through the anticipation of mutual physical

31 S. Matt and P. Stearns, 'Introduction', *Doing Emotions History*, 5.

pleasure. Such anticipation is expressed in all of these correspondences, especially as it is represented by what Milne, discussed earlier, calls the “disembodied sense of presence” where the dichotomy of “disembodied/embodiment” breaks down, as desire is constructed through representations of the body. Writers often enact such longed-for physical intimacy for the recipient as a way of conveying deep emotion and physical desire. The sensual bodily representation of longing is a way of inviting the reader into the space from which he or she is absent. For those writing from home, this allows them to reinforce the combatant's enduring emotional connection with home and reassure him of its stability; for those at the front, describing the environment can work either to reassure the recipient of their safety or to bring her into the terrible conditions of the frontline. Each thus offers their environment to the other as a form of sharing a space for the imagination of the otherwise-inaccessible recipient, a further defiance of state imposed gendered separation. As we can see in the following letters, the conjuring of the space and the writer emphasizes the tangible: the loved one's body and clothing and the space they share. Jenny Hartley's discussion of this practice in Second World War letters is equally relevant here:

The calming and reassuring tableau of composition draws attention to the writer as self-creator, and reminds us that the word ‘composition’ has more than one meaning. The wartime letter's primary function was to act as a bridge in its work as ‘a life support system’; its secondary function was to define and shore up the vulnerable identity of the wartime writer.³²

Writing from the 1st London General Hospital in Camberwell, London, where she is nursing as a VAD, Vera Brittain begins a letter to Roland Leighton:

Do you ever like to picture the people who write to you as they looked when they wrote? I do. At the present moment I am alone in the hostel common-room, sitting in an easy chair in front of the fire, clad precisely in blue and white striped pyjamas, a dark blue dressing gown & a pair of black velvet bedroom slippers.”(Sat Nov 20th 1915 – unpublished)³³

Leighton responds to Brittain in kind:

Through the door [of his dugout] I can see little mounds of snow that are the parapets of trenches, a short stretch of railway line, and a very brilliant full moon. I wonder what you are doing. Asleep, I hope – or sitting in front of a fire in blue and white striped pyjamas? I should so like to see you in blue and white pyjamas. You are always very correctly dressed when I find you (France 26 November

³² Jenny Hartley. ““Letters are everything these days”: Mothers and Letters in the Second World War”, 193.

³³ Unpublished letter to Roland Leighton, Vera Brittain archives, Quotations are included by permission of Mark Bostridge and T.J. Brittain-Catlin, Literary Executors for Estate of Vera Brittain 1970.

1915).³⁴

Leighton is conscious that the Vera of the pyjamas exists only in his imagination – an intimate image conveyed through letters which allow him into a space that propriety has not permitted him to enter in actuality. Anticipating time off during his leave in late December 1915, Brittain writes rather flirtatiously on Dec 1st, “If I get leave I will bring the blue & white striped pyjamas – also some mauve & white ones I have! But whether you can exactly see them on me is a different matter!³⁵” In a self-censored letter on Dec 5th, Leighton’s response in a P.S. hints at the possibility of the potential for greater intimacy: “Yes. If you get leave you must certainly bring the pyjamas with you. And why shouldn’t I see you in them after all?³⁶” The extension of the image of the location and the pyjamas further extends an exchange that is highly embodied; it exemplifies Milne’s hypothesis that “the body of the absent correspondent can become ‘visible’ in letter exchanges when [...]the author refers to the epistolary scene of writing³⁷”.

16. Pyjamas thus denote an intimacy that is not voiced directly and carry a *frisson* of the forbidden. These also take on significance in an exchange between Grace Malin and Frederick Sellers. Where in conventional courtships discussion of sharing a bed with a male partner in this context might have overstepped the boundaries of propriety, some exchanges, where the bedroom denotes a private space for writing or reading letters and for weeping over loss, use it to mirror the shared private space of the letter. As we have seen earlier in Taylor’s letter to Muggridge, physical intimacy, along with an implied subversion of propriety, is constructed through the image of shared sleeping. Having said goodbye to Frederic Sellers on his return from leave, Grace Malin writes of her return home:

I was so tired the only thing I could do was to hurry up & get into your pyjamas - & then I just cried myself to sleep – the whole day had been a tremendous strain never before had I needed more will to keep my feelings under control – never – it was agony. (7th June 1917; 412)

It is not clear whether these are his own pyjamas or pyjamas he has given her, but in either case

³⁴ Bishop and Bostridge (ed.), *Letters from a Lost Generation*, 189.

³⁵ Unpublished letter to Roland Leighton, Vera Brittain Archives. Quotations are included by permission of Mark Bostridge and T.J. Brittain-Catlin, Literary Executors for Estate of Vera Brittain 1970.

³⁶ Unpublished letter to Vera Brittain, Vera Brittain Archives, reproduced by kind permission of David Leighton, literary executor.

³⁷ Milne, *Letters, Postcards, Email*, 52.

they represent an intimate physical connection between them that takes place in the privacy of Malin's bedroom. While not an imagined space in itself, the story Malin tells is transferred imaginatively: Sellers cannot see her, but can imagine her in the pyjamas, in bed, weeping for him.

17. The tension between the imagined presence and the actual absence of the longed for individual is continually enacted in these and other letters: on the other hand, as we have seen, the imagined "sense of presence" also allows for an intimacy that might otherwise not exist. Frederic Sellers and Grace Malin married in December 1917. The following June, he writes to her from the Front: "Oh my Beloved you are very very near – as I write you seem almost with me – the loneliness momentarily vanishes - & then it returns & I feel the awful ache of the cleavage and separation as I do when I have bidden you goodbye" (11 June 1918)³⁸. Thus the act of writing is the "embodiment". The difficulty is to hold onto the "presence" since, even as it conjures the embodiment of the other, the act of writing may destroy it: when Toby Dodgson returns from leave in December 1915, Marjorie Secretan writes:

My sweetheart, I can still see the dear look on your face as the train went away, as though it were but a moment ago. I can almost hear your voice very low in my ear and feel your warm cheek against mine. So close you seem, so tantalisingly near and yet just out of reach. I have been so very sleepy all day today, which has made me very dull to what is going on around, and conscious, in a dreamlike way, of your presence. But even as I come to put it into words the dream breaks up and leaves me beginning to awaken to the bitter reality. (116)

The evocation of the writer's physical context represented above, and the shared imagined space analyzed earlier seem to come together in letters which communicate through the shared construction of a material space, such as a house,. This becomes the site within which, in an attempt to make the present enduring, they can imagine a future that defies the fleeting nature of the loved one's presence described by Secretan. Writing from the trenches at Neuve Chappelle on Monday 13th November 1916, Cyril Newman tells Winnie Blackburn:

It is 2.45 a.m. and you should be cosily asleep in bed. In your dreams do you hear my heart's cry – longing for you? O Winnie love! Are you still real? So long has been our cruel separation, so great the strain of experiences, that at times the past seems like a beautiful dream.

But the next day, in response to a letter from her about "our Home", he uses that fantasy to construct a more concrete imagining of her. Where the day before he had asked if she were "still

³⁸ Sellers and Malin correspondence.

real”, he now evokes her physical presence: “I’m a going to wander a moment or two into that delightful world of fancy [...] Give me your arm and wander with me into a world of our own, where nothing intrudes to disturb our peace.” He follows this by asking: “What sort of house have you in your mind’s eye, Darling”, followed by a long description of the house and furnishings and types of rooms. On the 27th of November, Blackburn replies with the same pattern of evoking physical touch and embodied presence, followed by descriptions of the house:

I am now going to reply to your lovely letter of the 14th. I want to shut my eyes until I am comfortably settled by a cosy fire upon your knee. You are in the arm chair. We are in the twilight [...] Our home. I cannot picture the outside. There is, however, a little garden in front.

Several more letter exchanges develop this future home in detail.

18. For others, time and expertise allowed for the creation of actual house plans as a way of anticipating a shared future through creating an imagined mutual space. Thus David Taylor, an architect and surveyor, sketches detailed house plans whilst a POW in the German Holzminden camp. The very specific descriptions that attend his drawings indicate the need to immerse himself in detail as a way to escape not only the boredom of prison camp, but to create a world that the couple can share in the present as well as the future:

In the Drawing Room I have put the fireplace in the corner, which will make that room more comfy [...] I have also put the north window up the other end facing east, and you will see I have a built-in bookcase. [...] On the back elevation the two bedroom windows will of course project over the ground floor and also the gables above, these being supported at the ends by ornamental brackets. (May 1st 1918; 369)

He sends her his drawings and they ‘build’ the house together in their exchange of letters³⁹. This mutual construction of the house goes beyond the much more general imaginative images of house and garden we have seen in the exchange between Newman and Blackburn, as Taylor offers house plans for Muggridge to respond to as they literally plan a potential future. Their actions are a further example of the subversion of their separation, as Muggridge’s responses mean that she plays an active role in Taylor’s world, transcending the division of home and front. Such transcendence speaks more generally of the ability of letters to construct an intimacy that contests the gendered politics of wartime. That is, this imaginative recreation of home and the combatant’s positioning of himself in it, along with the woman’s presence at the front not only in her letters and parcels, but in

³⁹ After the war they married and built the house they had designed together through the letters. *My Dearest*, 526.

an intensely imagined presence (often enhanced by photographs) that positions her with the soldier, undermine the ideology that defines the front in terms of a masculine space which excludes women, and home as a space from which the man is absent⁴⁰.

19. For Taylor and Muggridge the intimacy they had developed during the war resulted in marriage on their return. Others were not so fortunate: their relationship would remain enshrined in the exchange of letters. Hanna's argument that the ubiquitous nature of postwar grief in France arose in part because of the intimacies forged by letter-writing can also be applied to Britain:

Cultural historians of the Great War have stressed the pervasive presence and sometimes paralytic grief in postwar Europe. [...] This suggests that the survivors who mourned had forged enduring bonds of affection with those who had died. There would have been no grief without antecedent love. Yet historians of bereavement have not asked how the bonds of affection that made loss so painful were sustained prior to death in the face of extended absence.⁴¹

The letters discussed here illustrate very poignantly how the "bonds of affection [...] were sustained". All of the expressions of love and longing in these letters are written under the shadow of death that was ever-present for soldiers at the front⁴². Like the imagined houses of the future, the private spaces that these exchanges construct and the paradoxical "disembodied/ embodiment" that is contained in those spaces is a desperate attempt to defy death, as well as to survive emotionally in the terrible conditions. Thus Toby Dodgson writes to Marjorie Secretan in Sept 1915 that:

I've thought such a lot about you during the nights out here, and longed and longed for you; to feel your arms round my neck and your kisses on my lips. Really, I don't know how one would stick it here if it wasn't for you. (92)

On another occasion he tells her to "Write me a long love letter next time; never mind if it sounds

⁴⁰ For further discussion of an exchange between front and home that contests those binaries see, for example, Michael Roper, *The Secret Battle*, which examines the relationship between mothers and soldier sons, and Jessica Meyer, *Men of War: Masculinity and the First World War in Britain* which looks at men's identification with the domestic world of home.

⁴¹ Hanna, 'A Republic of Letters', 3.

⁴² So much has been written on the trench experience on the Western Front that it does not need further representation here. For example, see again Roper, *The Secret Battle*, for a specific analysis of the emotional experience. For a discussion of the war in terms of the middle-class civilian recruits such as those writing the letters referred to here see Samuel Hynes, 'Fourteen-'Eighteen: Civilian Soldiers' in his book *The Soldiers' Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War*. For a detailed immersion in the experience in the voices of the combatants and medical personnel, Lyn MacDonald's series probably offers the most comprehensive view: *They Called It Passchendaele: The Story Of The Third Battle Of Ypres And Of The Men Who Fought* (1978); *The Roses of No Man's Land* (1980); *Somme* (1983); *1914: Days of Hope* (1987); *1915: The Death of Innocence* (1993); *To the Last Man: Spring 1918* (1998). All books published by Michael Joseph Ltd.

sloppy, I shall understand. You darling, I've such an ache for you, the physical you, this evening" (3rd October 1915; 96). It could be argued that his physical desire for her is a defiance of impending death, as much as it expresses sexual longing. In June of the following year, as they anticipate marriage on his next leave, Dodgson was killed. The private intimate world they had created in their letters would remain there, but his presence persisted in an especially poignant way after his death in exchanges between Marjorie and her husband Charles Fair discussed below.

20. After death the letters persist as an embodiment of the dead, containing the loved one's handwriting and physical touch as well as the words themselves. In the absence of a burial or gravesite, and no material evidence of the death for those at home, that death would be manifest through the cessation of letters. Letters themselves could convey the news of death, being returned to the sender with the words 'Killed in Action' written on the envelope. Such a letter, sent to sustain the emotional relationship, can thus be seen as a marker of its end, but at the same time it allows for the relationship's survival, since the survival of the letter exchange allows the relationship to exist posthumously. Surviving collections of letters thus carry a further emotional import for the bereaved correspondents. As individuals can be said to become the letters they write, so the letters allow them to survive after their actual death. The collected letters of the dead (often with the addition of letters of consolation) can act as a memorial, and thus perpetuate a posthumous existence⁴³. When these letters are made available to the public either in published collections or in archives, such an existence extends beyond the immediate environment in which they were written and allows us to participate in an emotional world that would otherwise be unavailable. In this way, too, the letter writers continue to exist after death.

21. In August 1917, just over a year after Dodgson's death, Secretan met Charles Fair, their relationship initially developing through letters exchanged following the death of her brother at the front. When he proposes marriage a few weeks later she agrees immediately and they are married on Sept 18th. Where the Dodgson-Secretan letters show a relationship developing over time, the precipitous nature of Secretan's marriage to Charles Fair would suggest a defiance of the war that had robbed her of Toby Dodgson. There is no time for the kind of long drawn out passionate exchanges between leaves we find in the letters with Dodgson. They meet while Fair is temporarily in training at home and marry before his return to the front at the end of September.

⁴³ For further analysis of the concepts outlined in this paragraph see my work on war and grief: *Grief in Wartime: Private Pain, Public Discourse*.

22. What is particularly notable is that Secretan's relationship with Dodgson is not erased on her marriage to Fair. Rather, Fair includes Dodgson in his relationship with Secretan, with a letter to her recording that in passing near the sector where Dodgson was killed he had saluted him, and later he searches for his grave. His account is moving in that Marjorie's "sense of presence", so central to the letters exchanged between her and Fair, is now made inextricably part of her relationship to Dodgson in Fair's description of his visit to the grave:

A very tired but very, very loving husband and, in a sort of way, a contented one because, though in a sad way, he has really been in touch with Marjorie today. I have found Toby's grave [. . .] You can understand [. . .] the mixture of thoughts that ran through my head as I stood there. I think you were very present with me. I had taken a white card and I tied it on the cross with this on it, "From Charles and Marjorie Fair Xmas, 1917" [. . .] All round is every sign of war, but today the horror was all concealed by the snow and in the mixture of light – half sunset, half moonlight – it looked weirdly beautiful. [. . .] Somehow I felt a strange feeling of comfort, my darling, because at last all those miles away from you I had been able to do a little thing for someone you loved. (23 Dec 17; 346)

Marjorie replies: "do you realise that just when you were there I was coming home [...] facing that same sunset and very keenly alive to my love for you." (29 Dec 17; 351) Toby Dodgson's presence would continue in Marjorie Fair's life. Charles felt indebted to Toby Dodgson since he, in dying, had allowed him to love and marry Marjorie Secretan. Charles tells her "I feel a sort of reverence for Toby's memory partly because, tho' he didn't know it, he died to give me the greatest happiness I shall ever know" (318). A photograph of him hung in Marjorie and Charles's bedroom. Many years later, the connection was remembered and sustained when a rose was named after Marjorie, and her son and grandson planted it on Toby's grave in France⁴⁴. This change reveals the complexity of wartime emotion and the extreme burden of such emotion each of the writers considered here carried throughout the war. More broadly, these letters affirm the interdependence of men's and women's experience and the extent to which that interdependence constructs an intimate narrative that defies enforced separation. Each writer negotiates the separation by drawing the other into their location and, beyond that, into a shared imagined space. The exchange of deep emotion central to that negotiation, which on the one hand makes the separation and fear of death so painful, is also the means by which the relationship is sustained. As the individual writers defy wartime attempts to exert control at the most subjective level, and work to maintain their emotional lives, their letters offer us insight into emotional expression and behaviour in relation to the

⁴⁴ *Marjorie's War*, 413-4.

demands of the war and the values of the time. In these correspondences we find challenges both to wartime dictates, and to what some writers see as outmoded restrictions on courtship behaviour. These exchanges further offer ways of reconsidering our understanding of the war experience read through an analysis of emotional expression by men and women. Reading emotion, as Matt and Stearns affirm, offers ways of interrogating “traditional narratives” and thus has political and historical implications for how we remember the war, especially in terms of the gendered home/front divide. On the most immediate level, however, these correspondences allow us the privilege of entering private, “intersecting” spaces that originally belonged only to the writing couple themselves. As they become part of the public arena, these most private histories demand that we pay attention to the subjective and emotional experience they reveal. It is crucial to broadening our understanding of the war, especially in challenging the war narrative that continues to privilege the combatant arena.

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