

BC NARRATIVES OF THE GREAT WAR: *Home, Home Away, Loss, and Hope*

A Review Essay

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IN THEIR RECENT COLLECTED VOLUME, *Home Truths: Highlights from BC History*, editors Richard Mackie and Graeme Wynn chose an article entitled “Home Away: A Thematic Study of Some British Columbia Novels” by George Bowering as their opening piece and conceptual focus. A series of ten chapters highlights aspects of “home” as a unifying symbol in the history of this province. In considering home as a central theme, Bowering defines the settlement era as the period during which the primary task of British Columbians was the “attempt to find or make a home” in the region.¹ In the early days, the homes they found in this province were often temporary and unstable. Most settlers, according to Bowering, came from “somewhere else” and frequently migrated around the province in search of work: “Perhaps the predominant condition for people brought up in the territory of British Columbia is that they are brought up all over the territory or that they were brought to the territory to be brought up.”² A high rate of immigration from eastern Canada and from abroad combined with a high rate of internal migration as people searched for jobs in forestry, mining, fruit picking, and fish processing. Bowering consequently depicts the people of British Columbia as being continually on the move, trying to come to rest. He describes that place, that literal and etymological “home,” as a place to settle down. The province’s settlers were “looking for a home,” and for Bowering the quintessentially British Columbian question of this period became: “Where can I lay down my head?”³

¹ George Bowering, “Home Away: A Thematic Study of Some British Columbia Novels,” *BC Studies* 62, (Summer, 1984): 2. Reprinted in *Home Truths: Highlights from BC History*, ed. Richard Mackie and Graeme Wynn, 53-76 (Madeira Park, BC: Harbour, 2012).

² Bowering, “Home Away,” 2.

³ *Ibid.*, 10.

By the outbreak of the Great War, British Columbia had become home to the generation of young workers and immigrants who, in 1914, flocked to the recruiting offices with an enthusiasm that belies the claim that they had found a settled place in Canada's westernmost province.⁴ Every community in British Columbia provided more than its quota for the First Canadian Contingent that was soon making its way to the battlefields of the Western Front. Vancouver alone enlisted thousands in the army, two thousand in the Home Guard, several hundreds in the naval reserves, and a hospital unit of one thousand beds in Salonika. One-fifth of the students at the new University of British Columbia enlisted. And yet, in the collected narratives that recount their experience of the war they found overseas – the narratives that form the basis of this review essay – the modern reader will readily distinguish the longing they felt for home and family back in British Columbia. The province remained a strong emotional bond for its citizen soldiers overseas, an emotional refuge from the horrors of the Western Front. To borrow from Bowering, British Columbia may not have been their “Heaven,” but it certainly was a “haven.”⁵ Letters home and wartime poetry recalled vivid BC sunsets, bountiful orchards, towering mountains – and a desperate hope for more letters from home.

HOME

The narratives to be studied in this review are based on first-person accounts of the war experiences of BC soldiers who fought in the First World War. They are mainly drawn from published collections of letters home, journals, diaries, and poems, often recorded by soldiers serving at or close to the front. They display all the fears, discomforts, bonds of friendship, excitement, loneliness, boredom, homesickness, and/or apprehension of impending battle that became the soldier's experience of the conflict. The most detailed and analytic is George Godwin's autobiographical novel, *Why Stay We Here?*, based on his wartime experience as he journeyed from the Fraser Valley first to England for training and then later to the Western Front as an inexperienced junior officer serving in the trenches.⁶ Bitterness with the hard realities of war, growing spirituality amid the carnage, and strong links to his family and the fruit orchards of home are a common theme throughout his work. Other BC

⁴ Margaret A. Ormsby, *British Columbia: A History* (Vancouver: Macmillan, 1971 [1958]), 376.

⁵ Bowering, “Home Away,” 20.

⁶ George Godwin, *Why Stay We Here? Odyssey of a Canadian Officer in France in World War I* (Victoria: Godwin Books, 2002 [1930]).

narratives of the conflict include collections edited by descendants who worked with family records, letters written from the front, and secretly kept personal journals, often recovered from attics where they had been tucked away for years. *A Lovely Letter from Cecie*, for example, edited by John Graham Gillis, uses the 1907–15 Vancouver diary and letters home of Wallace Chambers, a lieutenant with the 16th Battalion (the Canadian Scottish) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF).⁷

In *The Bravest Canadian*, Sam McBride presents the experiences of naval captain Fritz Peters, winner of the Distinguished Service Order, the Distinguished Service Cross and Bar, and the Distinguished Service Cross (US) in the First World War, and of the Victoria Cross in the Second World War (1939–45).⁸ The book rests upon a recently discovered collection of twenty-eight letters he wrote from sea to his family in Prince Rupert and Nelson. Dorcas Susan Butt's forthcoming *There Was a Soldier* includes 124 letters home from "Charlie" Butt as well as five sent overseas by his wife May, who did not yet know that he had died in battle. They were later returned to her from the dead letter file.⁹ Charlie had signed up with the 231st Battalion in Vancouver which was collapsed into the Fourth Division's 72nd Battalion in France, the latter having suffered severe casualties. His early letters provide rich detail of life in training in Sidney, on a machine gun course, at the front, in the trenches, and behind the lines in billets. The letters of Chambers, Butt, and their wives, and those of the Peters family, poignantly reveal the heartbreaking loss brought both by long separations from family and by death.

Battlefront Nurses in WWI, edited by Maureen Duffus, presents diary excerpts, memoirs, and an extensive photo collection portraying the experiences of two Nursing Sisters of the No. 5 Canadian General Hospital sent out from Victoria in the summer of 1915, first to England, then to the Mediterranean Front at Salonika, Greece, and finally to military hospitals on the frontlines near Etaples, France. Volunteer war nurses were essential to the well-being and morale of injured soldiers, establishing a "home away" for the wounded in rehabilitation centres overseas.¹⁰ Compiled from the carefully kept war

⁷ John Graham Gillis, "A Lovely Letter from Cecie": *The 1907–1915 Vancouver Diary and World War I Letters of Wallace Chambers* (Vancouver: Peanut Butter Publishing, 1998).

⁸ Sam McBride, *The Bravest Canadian: Fritz Peters, VC – The Making of a Hero in Two World Wars* (Vancouver: Granville Island Publishing, 2012).

⁹ Dorcas Susan Butt, "There Was a Soldier: An Intimate Psychology of a Soldier during the Great War through His Poems and Letters of 1915–1918" (unpublished manuscript, Salt Spring Island, BC, 2009).

¹⁰ Maureen Duffus, *Battlefront Nurses in WWI: The Canadian Medical Corps in England, France and Salonika, 1914–1919* (Victoria: Town and Gown Press, 2009).

diary of the unit's commanding officer, G. Chalmers Johnston, *The 2nd Canadian Mounted Rifles (British Columbia Horse) in France and Flanders, 1914–1919* offers operational details from a commanding officer's point of view. Johnston frequently notes the accomplishments of his men, praises their fighting spirit, and mourns the dreadful losses they suffered in battles from Sanctuary Wood and Ypres through the Somme, Vimy Ridge, Passchendaele, and the Hundred Days.¹¹ In *The Ones Who Have to Pay*, editor Robert R. Taylor provides a rich analysis of patriotism, feelings for Empire, “the soldiers’ Victoria,” and experiences of war expressed by the war poets.¹² Their poetry, written overseas and published in Victoria’s newspapers, further reveals the soldiers’ deeply felt attachment to the beauties of the BC landscape and their homesickness for families left behind. Their sense of duty and loyalty ring out loud and clear, as does Victoria’s devotion to all things British. The images of home found throughout the poems are varied but always strong and emotionally charged.

One of the most powerful images of home in this collection of narratives emerges in Godwin’s *Why Stay We Here?* Naming the protagonist representing himself “Stephen Craig,” Godwin creates a haunting metaphor of the ancient “Gravenstein,” a strong, productive apple tree from the Fraser Valley orchard that he farmed until war broke out. Originally a German tree – an irony not lost on Craig – the Gravenstein reflects the solid, multicultural and agricultural roots of the land to which Godwin had become so attached before the war. His ambiguous feelings about the war present themselves in recollections of his years of schooling as a youth in Germany and in his respect for the Mullers, his German-speaking farming neighbours back in the Fraser Valley.¹³ As for the old apple tree: “It was not a tree as other trees were trees ... No. It was a friend, and a familiar, sharing with him the life of the valley ... For in this old apple tree he saw ... the lusty fruitfulness of the valley, of the earth.”¹⁴ It had been planted years ago when the colony was young, and it remained as a memorial to Godwin’s sense of worth and usefulness on earth. Leaving Vancouver by train on his journey to England to sign up for the war, Godwin felt a tremendous sensation of loss as he shifted his little son on his knee. Along with his wife and children, he was leaving

¹¹ G. Chalmers Johnston, *The 2nd Canadian Mounted Rifles (British Columbia Horse): In France and Flanders, 1914–1919* (Ottawa: CEF Books, 2003 [Vernon, BC: 1931]).

¹² Robert Ratcliffe Taylor, *The Ones Who Have to Pay: The Soldiers-Poets of Victoria BC in the Great War, 1914–1918* (Oxnard, CA: Trafford, 2013).

¹³ Godwin, *Why Stay We Here?*, 93.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

the orchard behind, perhaps forever. He watched the Gravenstein pass out of sight “with a strange tightening about the heart.”¹⁵ While training in England, Godwin stood “facing the commandant; behind him his draft company, rows of ramrods.” He fixed his eyes on a bud: “What was this bud? It was his childhood ... Country lanes at home, hedges a-bloom with wild roses ... Over there the Gravenstein would be much more advanced. In blossom soon, maybe in blossom now ... The old Gravenstein ... in the soft sun, mellow, a little wistful, but beautiful in age.”¹⁶

In Godwin’s metaphor of the Gravenstein we have a narrative mechanism that enables us to understand the meaning and realities of soldiers’ lives.¹⁷ Godwin’s reflective assessment of human character, his intuitive insights, and his construction of a “human truth” of war,¹⁸ as opposed to the operational details of the conflict, is far more perceptive than one would expect from a soldier in the heat of battle. Perhaps the difference, historiographer John Tosh might argue, derives from the fact that Godwin wrote his wartime autobiography in 1930. While Tosh recognizes that “personal reminiscence” is “an effective instrument for *re-creating* the past – the authentic testimony of human life as it was actually experienced,”¹⁹ it can also be affected by events and memory of the intervening time period. In the twelve years between war’s end and Godwin’s writing, his heightened spirituality and embitterment may have been enhanced by subsequent experience and disillusionment with the “war to end all wars” – or even simply by increased opportunity for quiet reflection.

Just as Godwin’s novel helps us to relive the deep sense of loss and longing experienced by British Columbians who were involved with the First World War, Robert Taylor’s collection of war poetry in *The Ones Who Have to Pay* gives us a heightened awareness of the soldier-poet’s thoughts of home. R.H. Parkinson of Kelowna (and later Victoria)

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 163.

¹⁷ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) 189, 195–96.; Donald E. Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences* (Albany: State University of New York, 1988), 155; D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 42, 78.

¹⁸ Hayden White, “The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory,” *History and Theory* 23, 1 (1984): 21; Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors*, 189.

¹⁹ John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History*, 5th ed. (London: Longman, 2010), 318. See also: “His or her memories, however precise and vivid, are filtered through subsequent experience. They may be contaminated by what has been absorbed by other sources ...[,] they may be overlaid by nostalgia ... or distorted by a sense of grievance”; and – “emotions, feelings, attitudes often lend conviction to the testimony but may be the emotional residue of later experience” (Tosh, *Pursuit*, 320).

wrote “Goodbye BC” upon enlisting in the Canadian Mounted Rifles: “Farewell to you beautiful land of the West, / We leave you, yet love you, forever the best / With sorrow we leave and yet eagerly go / To fight till we finish Britannia’s foe. / Through hardship and trials and through the great fray / Your honour shall guide us, your love be our stay.”²⁰ Parkinson continues with a tribute to the province’s mountainous beauty and to the memory of scenes that provided inspirational images to men who were leaving their wives and children behind: “The homes we have built, the joy of our lives ... enshrined in the heart of our Homeland, BC.”²¹

Many poetic tributes to British Columbia as a homeland stress the vigour and strength of the men who signed up from all parts of the province. They were the loggers, the miners, the “men with hearts of oak”; they were a “stalwart band.”²² In his study of memory and meaning in the First World War, Jonathan Vance refers to such writing as “the myth of the frontier woodsman,” a common element in the Canadian memory of the conflict. While Canada-wide most soldiers of the CEF came from city or labouring work rather than from forestry, one is tempted to wonder if the same holds true for the nation’s westernmost province.²³ Whether a myth or not, part of how British Columbia understood its contribution to the war held that its soldiers were valiant, strong, and dutiful defenders of the Empire and that many of them had been drawn away from their work in the forests, mines, and fisheries. The province was young and vigorous, and it produced soldiers worthy of the place they called home.

FAMILY

For many soldiers of the Great War, the most significant aspect of “home” was family. The connection to loved ones – past memories and future hopes of reunion – provided stability and hope for men and women surrounded by the brutal realities of war. George Godwin and Charlie Butt were first and foremost husbands and providers for cherished wives and children. The surviving letters home written by Wallace Chambers and Fritz Peters were primarily written as brothers

²⁰ Taylor, *Ones Who Have to Pay*, 212; *Colonist*, 12 June 1915.

²¹ Taylor, *Ones Who Have to Pay*, 212; see also: Lorne Ross, “The Western Scots,” *The Western Scot*, 2 February 1916.

²² Taylor, *Ones Who Have to Pay*, 156; Leonard M. Gould, “The Call of the 102nd,” *Colonist*, 16 July 1916. While in France, Gould sent an acorn back to Victoria, which was planted in Beacon Hill Park and became a flourishing oak.

²³ Jonathan Vance, *Death So Noble. Memory, Meaning, and the First World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997), 161. Vance states that, by 1 March 1916, only 6.5 percent of the CEF consisted of farmers, 18.5 percent were clerical workers, and 65 percent were manual labourers.

to their siblings; however, Chambers was also a new husband, and Peters was a concerned son who had to help his parents deal with devastation and loss. From being associated with the continual search for work and a place to lay one's head in the pre-war era, "home," for those overseas, increasingly came to mean British Columbia, the province in which their families lived. In one of his typical streams of consciousness, George Godwin observes the men from A Company "stamping half-frozen on firesteps. Waiting for the coming of rum. Thinking of home, of warmth, and comfort. Of their families, their girls. Wire, more wire ... Their trenches."²⁴ In one of his letters home to his "own Sweet Precious Darling Wife," Charlie Butt reminisces about sitting in front of an open fire in the home they had shared before he enlisted in Sidney: "I can see you sweetheart. This life makes home sweet to all of us. The harder our trials the more we think of home and our dear ones."²⁵ Past memories were important to Butt, and dreams of the future even more so:

When I get back [we] will never be parted again if I can help it. My own little farm somewhere will look very good to Daddy after this war is over ... I wonder how long it will be before I will be able to make that return trip to Vancouver? What a glorious day it will be dear and to be home with my little wife and family – what joy.²⁶

Letters from home were precious to the men at the front. In every message they sent, they usually asked for more frequent letters. A leave to Seaford Camp brought back memories of Butt having outings with his family in Stanley Park: "I love to look back and picture some of the times we have had together and some of those picnics we used to have at [the] beach."²⁷ Many letters seek to preserve the state of home as the writers remember it: "Tell Tom and Jack to keep the weeds out of the garden as it will keep the little boys out of mischief. Give them a big hug and kiss for their Daddy and tell them to be good until I get back."²⁸

Similarly, while on duty near Givenchy with the 16th Battalion, Wallace Chambers relished receiving "a lovely letter" from Cecie, his bride of only a few months. He also wrote many letters to his sisters Maude, Gertie, and Sue. With their parents having died when Chambers was a teenager, they had become a very close-knit group, even investing in

²⁴ Godwin, *Why Stay We Here?*, 57.

²⁵ Butt, "There Was a Soldier," 172 (Chateau de la Haie Camp, France, 7 October 1917). Butt was demoted from lance corporal to private upon arrival in France but regained the rank of lance corporal later on.

²⁶ Butt, "There Was a Soldier," 81 (Seaford Camp, England, 20 May 1917).

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 72 (24th Reserve Battalion, Winford, England, 5 May 1917).

Vancouver real estate together. With one or more of his sisters Chambers had regularly taken weekend canoe trips; gone roller skating; gone on walks through Stanley Park, Capilano, and Point Grey; and attended church, dances, theatre, opera, and even a box party at the Pantages Theatre. Although constantly sounding cheerful in his letters from the front, noting the gorgeous skies and birds that reminded him of British Columbia, Chambers was very forthright about the dangers he faced as a machine gun officer in charge of four guns. In most letters, he juxtaposes the impressive scenery of the European countryside with the sights and sounds of war: "France is a beautiful country in the springtime especially. The big guns have been booming all day."²⁹ The lightness of his tone frequently belies the conditions he faced. After beginning his letter to Cecie with, "Isn't this a perfectly lovely morning," and describing the warm sun and chirping birds, Chambers invariably moves on to the roar of the guns: "Cecie, you have no idea of the *awfulness* of this war. No one could realize unless they were right here on the ground. The cheerfulness of our chaps is remarkable."³⁰ Two days later his letter continues. They were under constant fire by sixty-pounder high explosive shells, which killed two of "the chaps." Chambers asserts: "The Germans are after us again, but we will sit in here laughing at them."³¹ In a letter to Maude, Chambers is very proud of a 16th Battalion success at Festubert on 20 May 1915, ending with the capture of a German position that several British units had previously failed to take.³² Then his letters stopped. Chambers was killed in action on 6 July 1915 at the age of twenty-nine.

Perhaps in an effort to shield his family from awareness of the danger he faced, Fritz Peters, captain of four successive Royal Navy destroyers during the Great War, frequently wrote home to relatives in Prince Rupert and Nelson, describing the tremendous boredom of his work at sea. He made little mention of the action at Dogger Bank, for which he was the first Canadian to be awarded the Distinguished Service Order (DSO), an award second only to the Victoria Cross, for gallantry in battle.³³ In March 1916, Peters was again decorated, this time for the daring rescue of a ship torpedoed by a German submarine. This rescue was carried out by the destroyer HMS *Greyhound*, which was under his command. In his next letter home to his mother, Peters makes no mention of the rescue but does

²⁹ Gillis, *Lovely Letter*, 8 (France, 9 May 1915).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 5 (France, 1 May 1915).

³¹ *Ibid.*, 7 (France, 3 May 1915).

³² *Ibid.*, 9 (France, 24 May 1915).

³³ McBride, *Bravest Canadian*, xvi. The battle at Dogger Bank was on 24 January 1915 - when Peters joined the navy in 1905, the Royal Canadian Navy had not yet been created. Thus, in 1914, he rejoined the Royal Navy.

assure her there would be an Allied victory “so long as England wills it.”³⁴ Peters was far more likely to reminisce than to mention wartime exploits: “Well I wish I were bound once more for the West – for the deep stillness of the mountains – alone a million miles from the rush and hubbub of the world – and just the vast eternity of space above you and the incredible sound of the mountains around you. I wonder if I shall see the slopes again in this brief mortal span.”³⁵ Once again, in a letter two months later, Peters recalls the sun sinking behind the great mountains of home and moonlight flooding “the still world with splendor.” He concludes: “If, indeed, there is a heaven above, it must be fashioned in this manner.”³⁶

Family traditions from home had attracted Peters to the navy at an early age. Two of his great-grandfathers held high rank: one as a colonel who commanded a United Empire Loyalist regiment in the American Revolution and another as a British general in the Crimean War. His grandfather was a career officer in the British Army and saw “heroic” action in South Africa during the 1840s.³⁷ As a boy in Victoria’s Oak Bay, he watched mighty warships steam to and from the nearby base at Esquimalt. Although his Christian name was Frederick, his family had called him “Fritz” since childhood, a slightly mocking response to his obsession for all things military, alluding to the turn-of-the-century stereotypes of “Prussian militarism” among the English community of British Columbia. Peters achieved a glowing reputation with the Royal Navy in both world wars for his gallantry. After he was awarded the Victoria Cross for action at Oran, Algeria, in 1942, Rear Admiral Dalrymple-Hamilton said of Peters: “Danger never held any bearing for him and engaging the enemy was the one thing he lived for.”³⁸ His letters home often repeated the theme that he was proud to fight for Country, King, and Empire.

George Godwin, as well, looked to his childhood to explain his family’s expectation that one goes to war when the Empire calls. He played with toy soldiers in the nursery. First, it was boxes of red and blue tin soldiers with pivoted arms. Next it was wooden toy forts, painted grey, and little leaden cannons that fired broken matchsticks. Ever acerbic, Godwin comments: “That had been the greatest fun on the nursery floor. Playing at killing.” Godwin believed war was “as much a part of childhood

³⁴ McBride, *Bravest Canadian*, 35 (20 April 1916).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 45 (26 September 1916).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 48 (9 December 1916).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 118.

as Gentle Jesus ... That was why people grew up without feeling the incongruity of Christian armies, of war, of organized murder.”³⁹

George Godwin and Charlie Butt were British immigrants to Canada, as were a strong majority of men in the first CEF contingent overseas. Fritz Peters served in the Royal Navy from age 15 to 23. All felt the powerful pull of loyalty to the Empire. All three suffered from financial stress, as did Wallace Chambers, in the aftermath of British Columbia’s 1913 economic downturn.⁴⁰ Godwin could not meet household or orchard expenses, nor could he find an interested buyer for his farm. He took his family with him to England where he wished to enlist with a commission. In London he managed to force his way into a meeting with Colonel Sam Hughes, Canada’s minister of militia, who rose to Godwin’s flattery and granted his request. Godwin was jubilant: “Because he was about to close with the hated Hun? No, No. Because he was about to receive the King’s commission? No.” He rejoiced because a subaltern in the CEF received good pay and an allowance for wife and children: “He had won a way to bread and butter, had solved the immemorial problem of making a living.”⁴¹ In his enthusiastic “It’s Up to You,” soldier-poet Charles Armstrong sums up well the patriotic atmosphere that encouraged young men to enlist: “Victoria’s proud of her heroes; / Her soldiers have all made good. / Hughes wires for more and they’ll go by the score ... / There’s many a man from this town / Who will fearlessly die / He’s given up his home, wife and kiddies; / He’s manfully doing his bit.”⁴²

HOME AWAY

In Bowering’s article, “Home Away,” British Columbia is the new home for the settler population. They are all from somewhere else: Britain, other parts of Canada, the United States, Germany, Galicia, and so on. British Columbia was their “home away,” a respite, because their real home, their original home, was now lost to them. Similarly, soldiers in the Great War had to establish a home away from home as best they could – in the trenches, posted to billets, at sea, and in military hospitals. By the outbreak of war, British Columbia had been settled long enough to be considered a real home by many of the soldiers, and their home away on the front became a matter of circumstance, with personalities,

³⁹ Godwin, *Why Stay We Here?*, 26.

⁴⁰ Ormsby, *British Columbia*, 384.

⁴¹ Godwin, *Why Stay We Here?*, 41.

⁴² Taylor, *Ones Who Have to Pay*, 133; *Colonist*, 1 December 1915.

locale, the war situation, and their own imaginations determining the possibilities.

For Charlie Butt home away became the English families he and May had left behind in Somerset when they immigrated to Canada. When on leave from training in England, or from fighting on the front, Butt would head back to the small town of Winford for quiet family vacations. His brothers, sisters, and in-laws kept him well stocked with parcels containing tobacco, cakes, toiletries, shirts, and even long underwear. Thus, in Bowering's words, some could create "Homes for the Homeless" with their care, letters, and help for Canadian soldiers overseas.⁴³ Indeed, Butt talked so much of his English "home" in his letters to his wife and sons in Vancouver that May felt the boys were becoming confused. She wrote to Charlie: "It is so natural to say home. I noticed in your letter you spoke of home as if it were THE HOME. I explained to Tom that you meant the Second home."⁴⁴ Butt worried not only about May and the boys having enough money and food in Vancouver but also about May's English father's advancing rheumatism and his inability to farm any longer. Eventually he had to inform May that the farm would be sold by auction and that sister Floir would look after her parents.

For Butt, home away consisted of small luxuries such as packages from home containing writing paper, tobacco, Keating's lice powder, and Vancouver newspapers, or occasional hot showers behind the lines and the rare billets that were dry, clean, had a bed, and/or did not smell of manure. Men looked forward to a "blighty," a non-threatening wound that would take them out of the line and hopefully to an English hospital, at least for a while. For leaves in London there were the patriotic organizations like the Maple Leaf Club that hosted the soldiers with bed, hot meals, and entertainment.

Life in the trenches was lonely, even though privacy was a commodity in very short supply.⁴⁵ As the number of casualties rose new recruits arrived in their place. The old-timers were often reluctant to get to know these new arrivals well as they could be gone in an instant, the victims of attack or shelling. As the ratio of veterans to new recruits declined, poetry often expressed a sense of isolation and distance. Thomas A. Hollins writes: "The province of B.C., that's where I long to be. / The home of all that's beautiful and fearless and free ... / A fairer place than Paradise, the province of B.C."⁴⁶ For George V. Jarvis, in "Thoughts of

⁴³ Bowering, "Home Away," 19.

⁴⁴ Butt, "There Was a Soldier," 378 (Vancouver, 22 September 1918).

⁴⁵ See also Bowering, "Home Away," 20, 25.

⁴⁶ Taylor, *Ones Who Have to Pay*, 170; "British Columbia," *Colonist*, 19 October 1918.

Home,” it is the sun sinking in the west that makes him most homesick: “As I sit on my bunk alone / And my thoughts begin to roam / With my brow buried deep in my hands/ I’m thinking of those at home.”⁴⁷

Historians differ on the role of camaraderie in creating a home away for the men of the trenches. Robert Taylor, in *The Ones Who Have to Pay*, finds that the Victoria soldier-poets make little mention of it, while Jonathan Vance’s *Death So Noble* points out that numerous memoirs of the Great War are nostalgic, idealizing the front and yearning for the days when life was dangerous and uncomfortable “but was characterized by comradeship, selflessness, and egalitarianism, qualities that seemed all too rare in peacetime.”⁴⁸ The first-hand accounts written by George Godwin in *Why Stay We Here?* and by Charlie Butt in *There Was a Soldier* contain elements of both camaraderie and its opposite. Godwin is closely attached to his friends Piers, Pilk, and O’Reilly but is disgusted by many of the others with whom he has to deal and upon whom he has to rely.⁴⁹ Butt mentions only one friend from his BC days whom he sees regularly at the front, but their relationship frequently descends into arguments. As for his life in the trenches, in over one hundred letters home he mentions only one new acquaintance whom he respects and considers a friend.⁵⁰

In *The 2nd Canadian Mounted Rifles* we see many details of trenches, billets, and campaigns from the colonel’s personal diary. G. Chalmers Johnston remains appreciative of his men’s adaptability throughout the trials created by horrid living and fighting conditions endured through record years of rain and snow and the constant experience of losing friends to grievous wounds or death. For Johnston, however, home away was created through the daily rhythms of military life.⁵¹ Johnston recalls long, tedious route marches, one being thirteen hours in duration, trudging through knee-deep mud and incessant rain, and ending in overnight billets that were “entirely destitute of sanitary arrangements.” He saw his men endure the useless MacAdam shovel and the Ross rifle, yet he was always impressed by the “remarkable ... rapidity with which all ranks fell into the routine of trench warfare.”⁵² The emotional rhythms that would carry the men through were created by their collective en-

⁴⁷ Taylor, *Ones Who Have to Pay*, 171. See also M.J. Ackincklose, *For the Love of George* (Victoria: First Choice, 2005), 89.

⁴⁸ Vance, *Death So Noble*, 77.

⁴⁹ Godwin, *Why Stay We Here?*, 78, 174-75.

⁵⁰ Butt, “There Was a Soldier,” 263 (Lozingshem, France, 4 March 1918).

⁵¹ Johnston, *2nd Canadian Mounted Rifles*, 7.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 12 (diary, 7 October 1915). See also Eviator Zerubavel, *Hidden Rhythms: Schedules and Calendars in Social Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 46.

durance. Johnston watched them as they trained at Paris's famous Gare du Nord, with "heads as cropped as a billiard ball," and, in spite of the tediousness of the journey, "everyone was in good spirits at the idea that we were at last actually on our way to take part in the great adventure."⁵³ Within days of arriving at the front, Johnston notes: "Weary, unshaven and plastered with mud as they were, they looked a very different lot ... Green troops as they were, they had found themselves and laid the foundations for the traditions and success in action which have made the reputation of the battalion second to none in the war."⁵⁴ Johnston's optimism and his frequent references to the men's fighting spirit supports the notion that an effective camaraderie created a home away for these soldiers. Military routines produced a sense of normalcy and likely,⁵⁵ at some points, a numbness that enabled the men to keep moving under unimaginable hardship.

Probably those who came closest to creating a home away for these soldiers were the nurses of the military hospitals. Whether it was their life-saving efforts in hospital tents near the front lines or their creation of home-like Christmas celebrations or entertainments in the hospital wards, Nursing Sisters such as Elsie Collis and Ethel Morrison brought immeasurable comfort to the wounded and dying. Through their diaries and memoirs, we know that these two women enlisted at Victoria in the summer of 1915, excited to serve and embark upon journeys almost unknown for women of the time. Having trained in Victoria and Vancouver, respectively, Collis and Morrison served with the British Columbia Medical Unit in England before being posted to Salonika, Greece, where there was an urgent need for medical services following the evacuation at Gallipoli. The nurses of No. 5 Canadian General Hospital (BC) arrived in a "baptism of fire," with a bomb hitting the centre of their hospital ship and "guns going off all around."⁵⁶ Conditions became far worse, with torrential rains throughout February 1916 and winds so terrible "you couldn't hear anyone speak," even in the surgical theatre.⁵⁷ By March, with the launch of the spring offensive by French general Maurice Sarrail, convoys steadily brought in more casualties and the crowded hospitals overflowed with the wounded and dying. Bombs were a constant threat to the flimsy hospitals, as was malaria, which forced the nurses to wear anti-mosquito headaddresses, gloves to the elbows, and

⁵³ Johnston, *2nd Canadian Mounted Rifles*, 10 (diary, 23 September 1915).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 13 (diary, 7 October 1915).

⁵⁵ Zerubavel, *Hidden Rhythms*, 19, 23, and xiii.

⁵⁶ Duffus, *Battlefront Nurses*, 67.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 102-3.

thick puttees in the hot, moist climate.⁵⁸ Together, the Nursing Sisters survived overcrowding, disease, depression, isolation, and exhaustion – with no chance for leave or relief, often becoming patients themselves.

On their redeployment to France, Collis and Morrison, following the German decision to resume unrestricted submarine warfare, narrowly escaped bombing attacks against hospital ships. Fourteen nurses and ninety other Canadian Army Medical Service personnel, several of whom had served in Salonika, were killed aboard *Llandoverly Castle* off the Irish coast on 27 June 1918. Through it all, the nurses maintained their “sisterhood” and continued their efforts to raise morale through offering decorated hospital wards, seasonal dinners, and innumerable amusements in the form of skits, sports days, and costume performances. Both Charlie Butt’s letters and Chalmers Johnston’s diary pay tribute to the significance of such events in maintaining morale, and the Milne Report on Royal Army and Canadian Army Medical Forces at Salonika recognizes the “high traditions of efficiency” of the Nursing Sisters: “By their great skill, care and attention, at a time of great stress under trying climatic conditions, the sufferings of patients have been greatly alleviated.”⁵⁹

ASKING DIFFERENT QUESTIONS

In examining accounts of the Great War from a narrative perspective, both the sources and their interpretations must be considered. The sources are personal, experiential records, and interpretation involves understanding them – both in terms of what they mean for the writer and how they are perceived by historians. In his preface to George Godwin’s *Why Stay We Here?* Reginald H. Roy advises: “It is not your usual story; rather it is a story of war and its dehumanizing impact on an individual, his fellow soldiers, his family and the many people he comes in contact with.”⁶⁰ Chalmers Johnston, awarded the DSO and Military Cross for distinguished actions with the 2nd CMR,⁶¹ on the

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 112–14.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 10, 97; Report of General Sir George Milne, Commander, British Army in Salonika, October 1916; Johnston, *2nd Canadian Mounted Rifles*, 38 (1 January 1917); Butt, “There Was a Soldier,” (213, 302 Canada Camp Bois de la Haie, 30 December 1917 and Neuville St. Vast, 2 May 1918).

⁶⁰ Reginald H. Roy, “Preface” (2002), in Godwin, *Why Stay We Here?*, 7.

⁶¹ Lieutenant Colonel Johnston was awarded the Distinguished Service Order; the French Croix de Guerre for the battle at Amiens; the Military Cross for the 2–5 June 1916 battle at Mount Sorrel/Sanctuary Wood; and appeared in Mention in Dispatches from Vimy Ridge and Passchendaele.

other hand, writes a personal but far more detached account than does Godwin, whose rendition is spiritual, reflective, and often bitter. Johnston certainly experienced terrible conditions and was affected by the deaths of his men, but his tone remains optimistic throughout. Perhaps it is a matter of different personalities – or of different roles and responsibilities. As commanding officer of a unit, Johnston's duty was to set an example for his men – to never waiver, to remain strong and focused. He typically recalls periods of heavy German artillery fire and the anticipation that precedes an attack as being moments of "great excitement in the line."⁶² That these sources disagree does not mean that either is invalid but, rather, that "different questions need to be asked" when interpreting them. In studying these narratives, "the focus of analysis shifts from the notion of memory as either 'true' or 'mistaken' to an emphasis on memory as process and how to understand its motivational meaning."⁶³ From this point of view, Johnston's memoirs represent a more traditional view, albeit one that is more personal than what is usually found in a standard operational record. His central themes are the fighting spirit of his men and their cohesiveness in the face of adversity. Godwin's novel, on the other hand, may be termed a "counter-narrative," a corrective to the assumptions of traditional histories and "a tool with which to contest 'official' versions of the past."⁶⁴ Godwin and Johnston have very different criteria for assessing the "truth" of war and reality.

Jonathan Vance characterizes Godwin's *Why Stay We Here?* as a bitter and powerful wartime odyssey, full of protest.⁶⁵ Godwin faces a personal struggle with his own spirituality and despises the way in which organized religion has been co-opted to justify killing in war. He feels competing loyalty in his duty to God and his duty to defend his nation and Empire. In his conflicting roles as father, provider, husband, soldier, officer, and killer, Godwin faces moral dilemmas brought on by the pull between these different conceptions of himself.⁶⁶ Towards the end of the war, he sinks into depression, feeling that he has become lost. In his preface to the novel, Reginald Roy notes Godwin's distress at "the blackness in men's hearts which made them willing to enlist to kill."⁶⁷ Yet Godwin had done so himself. In an effort to explain, rather than to

⁶² Johnston, *2nd Canadian Mounted Rifles*, 48.

⁶³ Katherine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone, eds., "Introduction," *Contested Past* (London: Routledge, 2003), 4.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 4. See also Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors*, 181, 227.

⁶⁵ Vance, *Death So Noble*, 43.

⁶⁶ David Carr, *Time, Narrative and History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 155, 162.

⁶⁷ Roy, "Preface," 8.

justify, his decision, Godwin comments: "Going with the crowd, how easy it was! How infernally hard to resist. It was only when one was alone that one seemed able to be honest." Godwin attributes his decision to a "herd instinct that swept away individual decency and left only a pack of wolves where men had been."⁶⁸ Certainly, Godwin's writing shows a heightened sense of humanity and morality, but, as with many of the memoirs written by men in the trenches, it was the waste of so many young lives that disturbed him the most. Phrases such as "a crater has been occupied" and "a spearhead to take the first shock" sound ordinary enough; to the man in the trenches, however, they say that a large number of men were once again killed in an attempt to gain a few yards of ground. To Johnston those few yards might have been important: taking ground was part of an overall strategy, one of the pieces that would add up to victory. To Godwin, on the other hand, campaigns to gain a few yards meant waiting for "human signals to give the alarm and, having given it, to die and have done with it. A sacrifice post. In a war of millions, where a handful of men is of no account. Coming across the world for this."⁶⁹ Godwin goes on to ask: "How many men have died to secure ... that stinking hole in the ground? How many men? How many widows? How many orphans?"⁷⁰

Colonel Johnston of the 2nd CMR, however, was not callous about death. Because he saw the strategic side of war he did not consider soldier deaths as wasted lives but, rather, as contributions to the Allied cause. In his diary he often listed officer casualties by name, noting their courageous actions.⁷¹ Nor was he oblivious to the devastation of battle. He resented having his field-based, common sense plans for action or recommendations for improvements glossed over or rejected by his superiors. He viewed with sadness and regret the most dismal and desolate landscape of shell holes, mules and horses smashed by high explosives or dead of exhaustion, shattered trees, scattered pillboxes, and, of course, the dead and wounded human beings. He grew frustrated over the shortage of shells, scarcity of artillery cover, and conditions of billets. But he rarely expressed bitterness. His admiration for his men was obvious, their "characteristic cheerfulness at Courcellette," their "dash" at Vimy, fighting to the "limits of exhaustion" at Passchendaele,

⁶⁸ Godwin, *Why Stay We Here?*, 32 and 154.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, III.

⁷¹ Johnston, *2nd Canadian Mounted Rifles*, 24-27, 33-34, 60, 70.

the “good judgment skills of the NCO’s,” the “splendid work,” all “showed how strong was the esprit-de-corps and fighting spirit of the battalion.”⁷²

The ways in which Fritz Peters of the Royal Navy and Chalmers Johnston of the 2nd CMR relate the events of 2-3 June 1916 provide an enlightening contrast. For Fritz Peters the battle in which the Germans captured Mount Sorrel, east of Ypres, resulted in the death of his brother Gerald, who was killed in a hastily planned counterattack that had no chance of success. Peters wrote home: “Well, Mother, what words of comfort can I offer? For you it is the hardest part. It is the price of Empire. I pray God I fall in the same manner with my face to the enemy ... Yours ever, Fritz.”⁷³ Chalmers Johnston relates the same events but shows his characteristic optimism. He records that, at about 8:00 AM, “things began to get pretty lively” with “every indication of a big show.” The 8th Brigade had orders to push on to Zillibeke Switch and “hold at all costs.” As the day progressed, however, he realized they were “about to suffer the severest concentration of artillery yet put on by the Bosche.”⁷⁴ In the morning he had watched officers marshalling the men in perfect order, but by noon he was greatly concerned, recording the names of officer casualties, calculating the number of men remaining in the 2nd and 5th CMR. By 5 June he calculated that the total strength of the 8th Brigade stood at less than seven hundred, with total casualties of 1,786 men. His own 2nd CMR had lost 50 percent of its fighting strength, the 5th CMR had lost even more heavily, and the 1st and 4th CMR had been almost completely wiped out.⁷⁵

In *The Journal of Private Fraser*, a first-hand account that Reginald Roy introduces as one of the most vivid, personal descriptions of trench life ever written by a Canadian soldier, the events of 2-5 June 1916 are depicted in still another way. In an account that is about twenty pages in length as opposed to Johnston’s four, Fraser describes in graphic detail the heat of battle, the suffering of the wounded, the scattered bodies of the dead, and the German artillery “pulverizing our front.”⁷⁶ In the three years prior to the outbreak of war, Donald Fraser had worked as a clerk with Royal Trust in Vancouver. He returned to Calgary to enlist with the 31st Battalion CEF and later served with the 6th Brigade. Fraser’s journal is far more personal and critical than the diary account

⁷² Ibid., 15, 17, 33, 35, 47, 56.

⁷³ McBride, *Bravest Canadian*, 39 (HMS *Greyhound*, 3 July 1916).

⁷⁴ Johnston, *2nd Canadian Mounted Rifles*, 23.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 25.

⁷⁶ Reginald H. Roy, ed., *The Journal of Private Fraser, Canadian Expeditionary Force* (Nepean, ON: CEF Books, 1985), 9, 146.

that serves as the basis for Johnston's *The 2nd Canadian Mounted Rifles*. He reflects on the soldier's experience of war – the fear, shock, and horror of witnessing a shell burst – “and one of his comrades alive a moment ago, now dismembered, bleeding, dead.”⁷⁷ Above all, Fraser states, it is systematic, continuous shell fire that is the hardest part of a soldier's trials: “No fighting is so tense as at these moments and never has the reason hung on so fine a thread. To get up over the parapet and rush to certain death at the hands of machine gunners or riflemen would be a welcome mental relief to remaining stoically in a trench with an avalanche of shells smashing and burying everything before it.”⁷⁸

Fraser believes that the counterattack of 3 June 1916 should never have been delivered. Artillery preparation was poor, the attack was made in daylight, there was little cohesion, and the exact position of the enemy was uncertain. Indeed, after seeing a friend's body “scattered to the winds,” he declares the entire “traffic in human flesh” that was taking place in the Ypres region to be “scandalous.” Units passing up the line returned completely shattered. His own battalion “foundered amidst the wreckage of obliterated trenches, smashed dugouts and torn sandbags. Our men simply melted away under this tornado ... The ground was strewn with the remains of the mangled and the dying.”⁷⁹

Yet in spite of two different viewpoints, one of an officer having to command and one of a private having to obey, the sense of duty displayed by both Johnston and Fraser remains the same. In his introduction to *The Journal of Private Fraser*, Reginald Roy points out that, although Fraser might rage at incompetence or criticize selfishness, he never questions the necessity of the war.⁸⁰ In coming to understand Johnston, Fraser, and Godwin in the Great War, we must recognize their place within the conflict, their personal values, their role in the military hierarchy, and their philosophy of life. For all three, it is not the Allied grand strategy or historical causation that appears in their writing but, rather, their own reasoning, which is based on their loyalty as soldiers – a loyalty that derives not from blind faith but from their coming to terms with the war and with their role in it.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 149.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 151.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 144, 146, 148.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 20.

NARRATIVES OF LOSS

Shortly after the Second World War, R.G. Collingwood urged historians to understand the “inside” of an event rather than concentrating on just the “outside.” Instead of a traditional focus on major issues, such as causes of war and revolution or the nature of progress or leadership, Collingwood emphasized the personal: the perspectives of the individuals involved – the reasons for their decisions, their hopes and doubts, and their way of thinking – as a way to further human self-knowledge.⁸¹ Narrative history developed as a field of historical investigation over the ensuing years, and it provides a thoughtful way of viewing the accounts of men and women such as the novelist Godwin, the Nursing Sisters Collis and Morrison, decorated officers Peters and Johnston, soldiers of the line like Chambers and Butt, and the Victoria poets.

These narratives preserve the memory of the two British Columbians who died in action and whose work is examined in this review: Wallace Chambers, a lieutenant in the 16th Battalion, and Charlie Butt, a lance corporal in the 72nd Battalion. Through their letters and through Chambers’s journal, we come to know these two fallen soldiers as men, husbands, brothers, and, in the case of Butt, as a father. We know of their prewar life in Vancouver and Victoria and their dreams of returning. Chambers’s letters home, contained in *A Lovely Letter from Cecie*, describe his joy in the beauty of nature and his increasing awareness of the horrors of war. The first three years of his journal, from 1907 to 1910, reveal a fun-loving, adventurous young socialite who enjoys the theatre, sports clubs, church sermons, biking, swimming, hiking, moving pictures, and long canoe trips. His two sisters, Gertie and Sue, are very much a part of his social group. He has many girlfriends, and, through his real estate investments with older sister Maude and a bookkeeping job landed with the assistance of his Uncle George, he has the cash to take them to a variety of wonderful events. His circle of friends grows to include a wealthy family that takes him on lengthy vacations aboard their yacht. He loves British Columbia, as witnessed by a ten-day canoe trip up the North Arm with stops at Sechelt, Gibson’s Landing, and Salt Spring Island, followed by an eighty-kilometre paddle to Indian River, Comox, and Nanaimo. By 1912 he was involved in several yachting races and a

⁸¹ R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1946), 9–10. On viewing lives from the standpoint of agency, see also William Dray, “The Historical Explanation of Actions Reconsidered,” in *Philosophy and History, A Symposium*, ed., Sidney Hook (New York: New York University Press, 1963), 133. On coming to understand the essential core of human experience, see Carr, *Time*, 59.

three-day cruise to Buccaneer Bay and Pender Harbour over the long weekend to celebrate Empire Day.⁸²

By the end of 1910, however, Chambers was discovering a new love – the militia. He was sworn in to the Vancouver 72nd Seaforth Highlanders Regiment, and hence began a new whirl of activity. As with Godwin and Peters, he had a family tradition to honour: his father had been in Ontario’s 19th Lincoln Regiment, and his grandfather in the 22nd Oxford Rifles. In the next year he was promoted to sergeant, and his journal took on an entirely different tone. Drilling at the Cambie Street grounds, dress parade, inspections, and regimental dances now became the order of the day. Coronation Day for King George V on 22 June 1911 was a highlight for him as he was part of the Honour Guard for a visiting Japanese fleet under Admiral Togo.⁸³ Particularly attractive to Chambers were the regimental sports teams (rowing, hockey, soccer, and football) as well as lectures on military law, rifle skills, tactics, skirmishing, outpost duty, and musketry regulations. Shooting practice and competition also began to occupy his attention, but it was the mock battles of training camp that Chambers enthused about most. For over a week, beginning on 26 June 1912, he took part in a training program that began with equipment assembly at the armoury, crossing to Vancouver Island aboard SS *Princess Royal*, a 6.4-kilometre march to camp at Cowichan Bay, and a 25.7-kilometre march through “very pretty” but hilly country. Sunday’s events included Divine Service with the chaplain of the 6th Regiment Duke of Connaught’s Own Rifles out of Vancouver. On Monday they met the “enemy” near Colwood. They returned to Victoria by midnight and were home in Vancouver by 6:00 AM, Chambers now finding himself tired, sore, and blistered but excited about the next portion of the adventure: “The 72nd battalion leave for Tacoma, USA today at 7 p.m. We have been invited to spend the 4th of July there. We expect to have a jolly good time.”⁸⁴ Once again aboard SS *Princess Royal*, the 72nd Highlanders went on to impress the crowd: “The Tacoma people gave us a great reception. They thought we were the best drilled regiment ever seen.”⁸⁵ In the following weeks, the Duke of Connaught reviewed the garrison, with Chambers presenting the colours for the 72nd. There was a tug-of-war, a church parade followed by bivouacs, skirmishes, company parades, and battle exercises. The year 1913 was even more hectic, with inspections by Sir Ian Hamilton and the Honourable Sam Hughes. The Regimental Ball,

⁸² Gillis, *Lovely Letter*, 116.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 66, 69, 91.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 93, 125.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 131–32.

the Imperial Club Dance, and mob control in Nanaimo during a miners' dispute were to follow.⁸⁶

We get a much greater sense of loss if we read of Wallace Chambers's death after learning about his activities and excursions during the years leading up to the Great War than we do if we simply read casualty lists, whose enormity creates anonymity as much as it conveys the scale of the country's losses. Chambers's joy, his sense of adventure and love of living life to its fullest, may still be detected in his letters home from the front, but we can see it gradually diminish as he is overcome by worry for the wounded men. In his last letter, to his Uncle George, he writes:

We will never give up until we have crushed [Germany] – although the toll has been awful, and will be more awful before it is finished ... I am glad [cousins] Harold and Ian have enlisted. I think it is the duty of every able-bodied man to bring about the downfall of that monster, "Kaiser Bill" ... It would do your heart good to see the way our chaps go forward when the order to charge is given.⁸⁷

Soon afterwards, Cecie Chambers received a letter of condolence on behalf of the 16th Battalion, saying it hoped she would receive great consolation from the knowledge that her husband had "played the game throughout and died a true soldier's death."⁸⁸ The letter had been sent by Walter H. Kemp, a former lieutenant in Vancouver's 72nd Seaforth Highlanders. Later on, from the orthopedic hospital where she had become a war nurse, Cecie wrote to her sister-in-law: "Oh Maude, I miss him more every day and life seems to hold nothing for me now. Some days I hardly understand it at all."⁸⁹

As with Cecie Chambers, May Butt became a widow when Charlie was killed during the breaking of the Drocourt-Queant line in 1918. At the end of her collection of Charlie's letters home, editor Dorcas Susan Butt includes five of May's letters written to her husband before she knew of his death, and she concludes with a final note – Letter no. 130 from Canadian Corps Headquarters acknowledging Lance Corporal Butt's bravery and Mrs. Butt's deep loss.⁹⁰ May's existing letters match Charlie's in their loving tone, her nostalgia for their ten years of happiness, and news of their two sons. In her last letter, written a month

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 141–43, 148.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 19–20 (Canadian Scottish, France, 16 June 1915).

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 23–24.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁹⁰ Butt, "There Was a Soldier," 374–85, 21 August to 2 October 1918.

after Charlie had died, May proudly tells him: “Tom joined the cadets today and he has to be down at school at eight o’clock in the morning for practice ... The boys have very good school reports for October. May God keep you safe from all harm my darling husband. With ever fond love from your loving wife, May.”⁹¹

As editor of the collection, Charlie’s descendant Dorcas Susan Butt writes an analytical chapter in which she discusses soldiers and the psychological significance of “time orientations”: past memories, the present struggle for survival, and hope for the future. She explores the way in which soldiers moved in and out of these three time frames as events permitted or demanded. Such shifts were difficult for some but were embraced by others (e.g., the men writing their hidden, forbidden journals). She concludes that “each of these time orientations would surge into a soldier’s consciousness due to the intensity of his circumstances. Perhaps it was such stimulation which charged some soldiers to seemingly super-human feats and motivated them to continue.”⁹² Charlie Butt was both deeply religious and routinely optimistic, and in his letters we see how he slipped easily between these time orientations. References to God and prayer; missing his wife, sons, and home; concerns for the garden at home or for his own family in England – all flow constantly through his letters. Gradually, however, his annoyances with fellow soldiers, his awareness of the grief of war, and his discomfort due to the cold and wet began to appear more frequently, usually accompanied by apologies for “grumbling” when so many had it much worse than himself.⁹³ Aspects of trauma theory can be applied to the changing tone of Charlie’s letters.⁹⁴ In his last letter home, editor Dorcas Susan Butt notes a degeneration in his wording – his repetitive use of the word “good” and a more despondent tone.⁹⁵ His sense of duty still predominates, but an awareness of “sacrifice” pervades his letters of 1918. On 2 September 1918, the members of the 72nd Battalion, exhausted by their quick return from Amiens, rushed into battle and suffered 223 casualties in breaking the Drocourt-Queant line. Charlie Butt died that day.⁹⁶

Nursing Sisters Ethel Morrison and Elsie Collis also suffered a devastating loss in 1918. Following their return from Salonika they were posted near the front at Etaples, France. Nursing Sister “Bobby” Wake,

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 382 (Vancouver, 2 October 1918).

⁹² *Ibid.*, 16.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 211, 213, 238 (France, 16 and 30 December 1917, 14 February 1918).

⁹⁴ Hodgkin and Radstone, “Introduction,” 6

⁹⁵ Butt, “There Was a Soldier,” 363 (Gentelles Wood, 31 August 1918. See also France, Chateau de la Haie, 24 January 1918).

⁹⁶ Butt, “There Was a Soldier,” 368–69.

an old friend from their BC hospital training days, was killed on 19 May in one of the worst air raids to strike a field hospital during the war. Her funeral, held jointly with those of two other nurses who were also graduates of Victoria's Royal Jubilee Hospital, was attended by long lines of Nursing Sisters honouring their fallen sisters. Sixty-six patients died and another seventy-two were wounded in the initial attack or shortly after, when an enemy plane flew in low to machine-gun those engaged in rescue work.⁹⁷

So often we think of soldiers' families back home when it comes to "loss" in war. For Fritz Peters, however, it was the opposite. While he survived sea battles and tragedies to fight again in the Second World War, his own family was devastated by the Great War. His brother Jack went missing in action with the 7th (1st British Columbia) Battalion at St. Julien on 24 April 1915, the same day that the regiment's commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Hart-McHarg, was killed in the fighting. His family could not accept that Jack had been killed, and living with the uncertainty was almost too much for either his mother or his father to bear. Although Jack's death was confirmed almost a year later, his parents could not face the truth, and Jack was still listed as "missing" in his father's obituary of July 1919. A second younger brother, Gerald, was killed in action on 2 June 1916 at Mount Sorrel. Sam McBride, descendant and editor of the letters sent home by Peters, writes: "As happened so often in the war to troops on both sides, Gerald went over the top of his trench towards the enemy expecting to die, and he did."⁹⁸ Bertha Peters never fully recovered from the death of another son – her avowed favourite – and she never returned to Prince Rupert, where the family had once been so happy. The father of the household, Frederick, remained in Prince Rupert with a fourth son, Noel, whose attempt to enlist had been rejected due to an intellectual disability. He later suffered a nervous breakdown (attributed to the taunting he received) before finally being permitted to enlist in the Forestry Corps thanks to the army's lowering its enlistment requirements due to difficulty in securing volunteers.

Most unusual, however, among the litany of devastation faced by the Peters family, was the death of cousin Eric Poole following his Court Martial for desertion. Dazed and confused by shell shock, he had wandered off, failed to return to duty, and was later executed. For the Peters family, Poole's execution was the only thing that could be worse than losing Jack and Gerald. Earlier, following Gerald's death,

⁹⁷ Duffus, *Battlefront Nurses*, 131.

⁹⁸ McBride, *Bravest Canadian*, 35, 37.

Fritz Peters had written to his sister in Nelson: “It is so heartbreaking. He was keen to do great things. He has died for the Empire and with his face to the enemy and the Gods are not so kind to all men.”⁹⁹ However, family members wrote nothing to each other regarding cousin Eric’s death. Perhaps the disgrace was too great – or perhaps they were simply aware that censors read everything. Months later, Fritz Peters made one oblique reference: “I was sorry to hear Eric Poole has been killed.” And another six months later: “Our family losses are just one in many of hundreds of thousands. Death is nothing compared to dishonor.”¹⁰⁰

George Godwin was also deeply affected by the loss of a prisoner to execution. In a satiric tone he recalls: “Private Tom Jones, No. 123456, having been duly tried by Field Court Martial for desertion in the face of the enemy was duly convicted and sentenced to death. The sentence was carried out on the 8th of February ... And there, sitting like a cornered animal, in terror [was] the face of the deserter.”¹⁰¹ The prisoner, once a soldier, had volunteered to serve but had failed to return to battle. Godwin felt ashamed of the army’s treatment of such men. The deserter “had sought honour, seeking to serve, and had reaped dishonor and ignominious death.” Godwin knew of officers who had been quietly evacuated – followed by talk of “nervous collapse.” In his sense of injustice on behalf of the deserter, he continued:

And over there, in British Columbia, in the forest, on the swift rivers, or in the great mountains, such little men as this were living, free and happy. What was the offense of this so pitiable human being, degraded from the dignity of manhood to this condition, this plight? It was because he had tossed away the liberty of the wilds, of the beautiful free world he loved, because within his poor simple mind were notions of chivalry and sacrifice.¹⁰²

In this passage Godwin offers an emotional explanation of battle stress, a scenario that Fritz Peters could not, or would not, even mention. Court Martial proceedings of the Great War were kept secret from next-of-kin and the House of Commons.¹⁰³ In a story that diverges from the usual battle narrative, Godwin helps to restore one of these “silenced voices.”¹⁰⁴

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 41 (from sea, 24 July 1916).

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 53, 60 (from sea, 10 February and 3 August 1917).

¹⁰¹ Godwin, *Why Stay We Here?*, 148.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ McBride, *Bravest Canadian*, 53. See also Len Deighton, *Blood, Tears and Folly* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 130–31.

¹⁰⁴ Catherine Kohler Riessman, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2008), 186.

In studying these personal narratives of the war, we are led to ask: “What was the meaning of war for *this* soldier?” Wallace Chambers, Charlie Butt, Jack and Gerald Peters, Eric Poole, and the executed prisoner all lost the most. Godwin’s losses included his faith, his belief in justice, and his self-respect – all of which he considered a consequence of having given in to the herd instinct, against his own pacifism and Christianity, to go off to war to kill other men. Chalmers Johnston, with his more traditional military approach to duty, loyalty, and leadership, grieved the loss of many courageous young soldiers sacrificed to defend the Empire.¹⁰⁵ Ethel Morrison and Elsie Collis lost three close friends in the Etaples bombing as well as countless patients who suffered fatal wounds. Even more difficult was their need to nurse patients who they knew would be disabled for life – amputees, the disfigured, the shell-shocked. Fritz Peters lost much of his own family during the war, immersed himself in a postwar career in Africa that remains largely unknown, and later served as commandant of a British Secret Intelligence Service school for training spies and saboteurs.¹⁰⁶ He returned to the Royal Navy and died during the Second World War.

HOPE

At the end of the Great War, hope was not for everyone. Some had already received their black-edged envelopes regretting the loss of cherished loved ones. Some returned from overseas so physically or mentally wounded they could never rebuild their old way of life. As George Bowering writes in “Home Away,” calamity can separate us from our homes.¹⁰⁷ Those who did survive longed to return home, back to the “normal” that had been their solace during the war years. After 1918, their “home away” gradually gave way to their coming “home” to British Columbia.

At first there seemed little hope for George Godwin. Physically, he was a shadow of his former self, his six foot (1.8 metre) frame weighing less than 115 pounds (52 kilograms). He returned alone to the Fraser Valley to recuperate from tuberculosis. He found that his old friends were gone: the Mullers had been driven out, Old Man Dunn had moved away, Bob England had died at Passchendaele. He learned that his three best friends from overseas – Piers, Pilk, and O’Reilly – had all been killed. In Vancouver he came across Major MacDonald, now a shell

¹⁰⁵ Johnston, *2nd Canadian Mounted Rifles*, 24, 26, 56, 68, 70, 72.

¹⁰⁶ McBride, *Bravest Canadian*, 79.

¹⁰⁷ Bowering, “Home Away,” 19.

of a man. His former job as a school principal had been taken over by a man who had stayed home from the war. To Godwin the old major appeared a ghost, a “spook walking along.” In truth, as far as Godwin was concerned, the man he knew had “died” overseas.¹⁰⁸

Returning to the orchard, Godwin discovered that the old Gravenstein was gone. Dejected, he left, but travelling further he discovered a new orchard that had grown in his absence. He had planted it before he left, using grafts from the great old tree. Here was the promise of rebirth and renewal: “The ancient Gravenstein had gone up with the crackle of fire but the tree endured, here in this young orchard ... Night would bring new day, born of the darkness, born of the death of other days.”¹⁰⁹ Godwin would heal eventually, rejoining his family. He had been *in* the war but not *of* it. And he liked to believe his dead friends would live again through the families they left behind.

Charlie Butt’s wife May and their two sons settled in West Vancouver, where sons Tom and Jack later married. The entire family moved to Salt Spring Island to farm and run a resort. May attended the Vimy Pilgrimage of 1936.¹¹⁰ The sisters of Wallace Chambers remained in Vancouver; sister Gertie had five children, including John Graham Gillis, who edited *A Lovely Letter from Cecie*, based on what he found in a military box filled with letters, journals, photos, and memorabilia passed on to Gillis by his Aunt Sue.¹¹¹ In the words of Jonathan Vance, most soldiers “were simply ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances.”¹¹² Like Chalmers Johnston, many had arrived back in Vancouver or Victoria on a brilliantly sunny day “to meet with a wonderful reception from the townspeople and our comrades who had returned before us.”¹¹³ Each of the families carried on to rebuild their homes and lives.

Nursing Sisters Collis and Morrison returned to British Columbia to take up positions at rehabilitation hospitals for returning soldiers. Here they brought hope to many lives as they nursed at the Esquimalt Military Hospital. Morrison had been awarded the prestigious Royal Red Cross at Buckingham Palace for bravery in the field and was twice Mentioned in Dispatches.¹¹⁴ Collis was appointed matron at Resthaven in Sidney, British Columbia. One of the Victoria war poets paid tribute to the convalescent home where he had received medical treatment and

¹⁰⁸ Godwin, *Why Stay We Here?*, 180, 205, 208.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 210.

¹¹⁰ Butt, “There Was a Soldier,” 372.

¹¹¹ Gillis, *Lovely Letter*, iv, v.

¹¹² Vance, *Death So Noble*, 197.

¹¹³ Johnston, *2nd Canadian Mounted Rifles*, 73.

¹¹⁴ Duffus, *Battlefront Nurses*, 144.

vocational training: "And dear old 'Resthaven' by the silver sea / Here all is peace, the 'Sisters' are so kind... / To all these 'Sisters' here, who have given up their homes / To make us boys happy, how much we owe ... / And no matter where I wander or wherever I may roam, / I shall always think of 'Resthaven' as Home Sweet Home."¹¹⁵

And what of British Columbia? Victoria's poets expressed both pride and sadness for those who would not return. British Columbia attracted demobilized soldiers from all across Canada as soldiers were authorized to take their discharge wherever they wished. It was the land of hope. The returned soldiers were "old in experience but inspired by a youthful eagerness for knowledge."¹¹⁶ Great pride was shown in General Arthur Currie's accomplishments: "And with each battle won / Fresh laurels have evinced your worth... / All Canada salutes thee / As one who nobly led her glorious sons / To Victory and Peace."¹¹⁷ Each soldier brought home his own memories and meaning, but together they created a new "cultural memory" in British Columbia.¹¹⁸ In *British Columbia: A History*, Margaret Ormsby notes that, following the war, "what the province had lost in the way of its British traditions, it had gained in Canadian identity. In the camps and hospitals in England and on the fields of Flanders, it had become apparent that 'British Columbian Canadians' were more Canadian than British."¹¹⁹

The soldiers who survived the Great War returned to a home that had been profoundly changed by these events on the far side of the world. The mountains, rivers, lakes, sunsets, and trees were the same ones they had remembered, but the war experience had transformed the province. The people were more self-confident. They were certainly wiser, sadder, and war-weary. But British Columbia was now felt to be a significant part of Canada, not an outpost of Empire. In their own way, Godwin, Chambers, Johnston, Peters, Butt, Collis, Morrison, and the poets of Victoria had each helped to create for British Columbia a new cultural meaning and a sense of identity.

¹¹⁵ Taylor, *Ones Who Have to Pay*, 153–54. Edwin Freeman, "Resthaven," *Colonist*, 28 January 1917. Freeman served with the 7th (1st British Columbia) Battalion and was wounded in the first gas attack at Ypres, 1915.

¹¹⁶ Ormsby, *British Columbia*, 402.

¹¹⁷ Taylor, *Ones Who Have to Pay*, 149. "To General Sir Arthur Currie (By a 'Returned Soldier')," *Colonist*, 5 October 1919.

¹¹⁸ For "cultural memory," see Hodgkin and Radstone, "Introduction," 5.

¹¹⁹ Ormsby, *British Columbia*, 402.