

Letters & Diaries of the Great War

Considering Historical Perspectives

A. Setting the Background

Prior to working with students to establish historical significance of this event, some background knowledge about Canada's role in World War I could be provided.

- History 30 curriculum : Unit 3 pages 316-323
https://www.edonline.sk.ca/bbcswebdav/library/curricula/English/Social_Studies/History_30_1997.pdf
- The Canadian Encyclopedia: First World War:
<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/first-world-war-wwi/>
- Encyclopedia of Saskatchewan: World War 1 and Saskatchewan:
Included in this learning package, courtesy of University of Regina Press.
- Canadian War Museum: Canada and the First World War:
<http://www.warmuseum.ca/firstworldwar/>
- *Saskatchewan History*: Great War Issue, Fall-Winter 2014, Vol. 66, No. 2
- John Herd Thompson, *Harvests of War: The Prairie West 1914-1918* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1978).
- "From the Prairies to the Trenches" Great War video series produced by the Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan:
 - o Part 1: 1914: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pNZAjErJAuY>
 - o Part 2: 1915: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iaylaT5EZAM>
 - o Part 3: 1916: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U-Hb8nVNehw>
 - o Part 4: 1917: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EtMU2TciY40>

B. Review the criteria for appreciating historical perspective.

We can better understand the people of the past if we ...

- Remember there is a difference between current world views and those of earlier time periods.
- Avoid imposing present ideas on actors in the past.
- Know that the historical context helps establish perspective of people in the past.

- Take the perspective of historical actors, meaning we infer how those people felt based on evidence.
- Remember that different people have diverse perspectives on the same event.

Adapted from The Big Six Historical Thinking Concepts by Peter Seixas and Tom Morton (Nelson Education 2013)

C. Brainstorm different ways people in Canada were involved in supporting the war effort in World War I.

Students could consider involvement on the Western Front on the battlefields, on the oceans, in the air, nurses and hospitals and other similar efforts. They might also consider and mention home front support and involvement.

Ask students to think about who these people would have likely corresponded with. How did they record their experiences at the time and later? (Journals, letters, photographs, scrap books).

What might they have wanted to remember and share about their experience? What could they freely share? What was not allowed to be shared (censored)? What was not easy to share?

D. Prepare and distribute the student copies of the war letters and accompanying bibliographic notes from 4 different Saskatchewan participants in World War I for a *first reading*:

- **Victor N. Swanston**
 - Biographical notes and transcribed letters available in pdf learning package and online at http://www.saskarchives.com/Great_War
- **Gladys Matheson**
 - Biographical notes, plus original diary entries and reminiscence excerpts scanned and available online, at http://www.saskarchives.com/Great_War
- **Charles Douglas ('Dick') Richardson**
 - Biographical notes and transcribed letters available in pdf learning package and online at http://www.saskarchives.com/Great_War
- **James ('Jim') C. Aitchison**
 - Biographical notes and transcribed letters available in pdf learning package and online at http://www.saskarchives.com/Great_War; original letters scanned and available online only

Assign individual students (or small groups) ONE of the participants to study closely for this lesson.

For their first reading, ask them to read their package of letters and biographical overview to get a sense of who the person was and what their role in the war was. Ask them to **note a few things that were interesting** and **a few things that they were unsure or had questions about** and share these back in a partner think-pair-share or large group sharing experience.

E. Introduce the *Different Perspectives Graphic Organizer*. Using the 4 different sets of letters, identify 4 different perspectives of World War I that will be explored further in a second reading of the letters.

- Victor N. Swanston – Canadian born single man in his 30's
- Gladys Matheson– trained nursing sister helping wounded soldiers
- Charles Douglas ('Dick') Richardson – Canadian born single man, university educated, 24 when enlisted
- James ('Jim') C. Aitchison – recent immigrant to Canada from Scotland and dedicated husband and father of 7 young children in Saskatoon

Help students identify what the specific and unique **needs** and **concerns** might be for these participants as they complete the first sections of the organizer.

Read through the letters again, looking for specific **text references** that help illustrate the author's needs and concerns about the war and record it on the organizer.

F. Create a summary position and reaction statement about World War I that captures the historical perspective of the author of the letters.

Students will need to ***make inferences based on evidence provided in the letters*** to help them.

These statements can be written in first person as if it was the author speaking.

These can be recorded in the last section of the graphic organizer.

Different Perspectives organizer and teaching sequence adapted from Classroom Strategies for Interactive Learning. 3rd ed by Doug Buehl (International Reading Association, 2009).

Extension Tasks Related to Historical Perspective

- Respond to the letters with a series of letters back to the author. What would the other side of the conversation be? What would the author be hearing from those at home with whom they are in correspondence with? What different perspectives might they be hearing about how the Great War is impacting others at home?
- Assume that a letter (or personal journal) got through that was not censored. What might the author have shared that was reflective of what they were REALLY thinking and feeling? Write the letter or journal entries.

World War I and Saskatchewan

From August 4, 1914, when Britain's declaration of war brought Canada into World War I, two attitudes prevailed in Saskatchewan: one was a determination to defend all things British, and the second was an appreciation for jobs and wages which peace had not provided. Many of the first volunteer soldiers answered blood ties to the Empire: for example, of 68 Swift Current recruits in the first days of the war, 63 were British-born. But as seasonal work dried up later that fall, more volunteers came from other ethnic groups. Many unemployed responded to the \$1.10 per diem provided to soldiers, as unemployment had risen since the end of western railroad expansion in 1912. Saskatchewan politicians, clerics and journalists asked the federal government to expand the armed forces *faster* to absorb all the unemployed. Soldiers received a warm send-off from a populace excited by the prospect of a short war. Scrambling to enlist, some Saskatchewan soldiers served in regiments mobilized in other provinces. The Princess Patricia Light Infantry (the Pats), one of the first Canadian units to reach France in December 1914, recruited veterans from across the country who had "no attachment to any militia"; as they were experienced, they were sent to the front with much less training. So many men from the West enlisted with the Pats that they were often considered a prairie battalion by other units. Similarly, a rumour that Manitoba units would reach the fighting sooner prompted many Saskatchewan lads to join there.

Canada's military leadership re-shuffled all the units going overseas into numbered battalions. The 95th Saskatchewan (later Regina) Rifles and the 105 Fusiliers (later Saskatoon) both fought with the 11th Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF), and in turn sent many reinforcements to the 5th Battalion CEF. The North Saskatchewan Regiment (later Prince Albert) and the South Saskatchewan Regiment (later Weyburn) also received their marching orders in the fall of 1914. Moose Jaw's 27th Light Horse was called in early 1915. After the initial mobilization, recruiters were simply given blocks of numbers to assign. CEF battalions like the 65th and 96th battalions, mobilized in Saskatoon in 1916, were recruited there. Later the 28th, 46th, 68th, 152nd and 195th battalions all mobilized men from Saskatchewan, but province of origin was not considered important. Although records of the Saskatchewan units can be confusing or non-existent, their war experience proved remarkably uniform. Assembled at Valcartier Camp near Quebec City, they embarked for Britain and a few months' further training before joining other Canadian units fighting in the trenches in Flanders. Here their war abbreviates to a list of famous battles: Ypres (April–May 1915), Festubert (May 1916), Mount Sorel (June 1916), the Somme (July–November 1916), Vimy Ridge (April 1917), Hill 70 (August 1917), Passchendaele (November 1917), Amiens (August 1918), and Valenciennes (November 1918).

The battle for Ypres, the gateway to the French ports of Calais and Dunkirk, demonstrated the mettle of 1st Canadian Division when they were first to encounter chlorine gas and suffer casualties. But the headlong daylight rushes against machine-gun pillboxes, adopted by military leaders on both sides, meant that every battle had high casualty rates. The daily course of trench warfare also took a large toll. At the Somme in 1916 (600,000 Allied casualties), three Canadian divisions suffered 2,600 casualties *before* the main onslaught began.

Eventually the Somme, where 24,029 men from the four divisions of the Canadian Corps died for six miles of No Man's Land, changed the country's recruitment policy. Even before conscription was introduced in August 1917, the army command began breaking up units in training to rush the soldiers forward as replacements at the front. The 196th Western Universities Battalion was one of the casualties of this change. Led by Walter C. Murray, president of the University of Saskatchewan, they sought to recruit and train a special soldier "of the university type"—that is,

British. Almost all male students were required to train, and as one student of agriculture explained to his mother: “They make you feel like two cents at the University if you don’t enlist.” The University of Saskatchewan outfitted some 200 men, but these efforts ceased after mid-1916 when the Brigade became replacements for other regiments. Another special unit, the 107th Battalion, mobilized many Aboriginal soldiers from Saskatchewan. Some of these Aboriginal units, with reputations for valour, were disbanded for fear they might be wiped out all at once.

By 1916, all Canadian infantry entered battle together as the Canadian Corps; after their hard-won victory at Vimy Ridge, they had one of their own as commander: General Arthur Currie. At home, however, divisions had deepened. Camps for “enemy aliens” opened across the prairies in October 1914 and eventually interned over 8,000—mostly Ukrainians (known as Ruthenians for that area of the Austro-Hungarian Empire). Along with conscientious objectors, Mennonites and Doukhobors, they were disenfranchised by the Wartime Elections Act of 1917, which included alien immigrants naturalized after 1902. Saskatchewan voted for the revamped Unity Government of Robert Borden in December 1917 largely out of support for conscription. However, the Military Services Act (August 1917), administrated by local committees, continued to exempt conscripts in Quebec, but drafted the farmers’ vital workers in Saskatchewan, where local committees were made up of, or influenced by, veterans. Farmers were further dismayed when agricultural exemptions were lifted in the spring of 1918 as German offensives produced even greater casualties.

Armistice on November 11, 1918, came as a surprise. A poor crop had signaled another hard year. Divisions over war and conscription, between English and French Canadians, between Empire and immigrant, would continue for years.

Scott Broad

Further Reading

Giesler, P. 1982. *Valour Remembered: Canada and the First World War*. Ottawa: Government of Canada Veterans Affairs; Martin, W.M. 1919. *What Saskatchewan Has Done in the Great War*. Regina: J.W. Reid Government Printer; Thompson, J.H. 1978. *The Harvests of War: The Prairie West, 1914–1918*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart.

About Victor N. Swanston

- Born in Ottawa in 1884.
- Was an unmarried farmer from the Bulyea district when he signed up for duty at Valcartier, Quebec at the age of 30.
- Served as a Private with the 5th Canadian Infantry Battalion (Western Cavalry) in France, 1914-1918 and with the occupation forces Germany in 1919.
- While on leave in England, he met Florence Chapman. They were married in 1919 before leaving for Canada.
- Discharged on August 18, 1919 and returned to farming.
- Went to work for General Motors assembly plant in Regina.
- Laid off in the 1930s, he and his family moved north to Big River to take up farming under the provincial government's relief program.
- Moved back to Regina to work for Regina Industries Limited which manufactured munitions during the Second World War.
- Victor Swanston died in 1974.

Context for the Victor N. Swanston fonds

R-E 1538, Victor N. Swanston's war service records, were donated to the Saskatchewan Archives in 1993 by his daughter Yvonne (Swanston) Burgess of Bulyea. They include postcards, military pay book, photographs, letters, and song books.

The collection includes a copy of the book *"Who Said War is Hell," No. 12895, Private Victor N. Swanston, Fifth Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Force, World War 1*, by Charles and Yvonne Burgess. The book contains extracts from the war diaries of Victor Swanston and his brother Ernest, which are used in the diary entries below.

Photograph from Saskatchewan Archives, R-41.4, File 21

Saskatchewan Archives

R-E 1538: Diary of Victor Swanston, from *Who Said War is Hell,* No. 12895, Private Victor N. Swanston, Fifth Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Force, World War 1.

April 22, 1916

Rained last night and today, mud up to the horses' bellies everywhere. Took rations up past "Shrapnel Corner" and on up to within a few hundred yards of the front line trenches. Shells were landing on the Corner every few seconds when we got back that far, so we waited 'til a batch landed, then rushed around the Corner, just escaping the next lot which landed behind us.

It was so dark that we wouldn't have been able to see the shell-holes in the road, only for the Star shells that Fritz sent up every little while. Came back a round-about way through Ypres, so as to have a one way traffic, that town is sure hell of a place to drive through at night.

I wrote a poem about "Shrapnel Corner":

Quiet Night

When you go up to the trenches
With the rations late at night,
On a road that's full of shell-holes all the way,
And the rain comes down in torrents,
Flashing guns your only light,
You are apt to feel most anything but gay!

When you reach a torn-up cross-road,
"Shrapnel Corner" is its name;
All the trees about the place are blown off "short"
By much high explosive shrapnel,
Well, you're there to play the game,
But how – oh, how! You'd like a little "snort".

When you hear a moaning whistle
Very quickly drawing near,
And you tip your old tin hat towards the sound,
Then, when that shell breaks o'er you,
Looking like a wooly bear,
Well! You have sneaking feeling for the ground.

When up closer to the trenches,
And machine-guns round you play,
And no ration party anywhere in sight,
Well, you're feeling mighty restless,
For you want to get away,
Even though it's what is called a quiet night.

April 24, 1916

Left out billets near the windmill and moved to Poperinghe, put up our horse lines near the station, a good place if it keeps dry. Ern, Reid and I went to a picture show, while inside, two shells hit near the buildings. We were afraid for the awhile that the people who ran the show were going to close the place, they were so scared. But they finished the picture first and we weren't out our show.

Took a walk through town from there and saw a British General and Staff passing through the Town Square. Some men from the "Guards" Battalion were standing to attention on the street corner, when one of our Machine Gunners (a little Irishman) walked by with his hands in his pockets. A big, six-foot guard yanked him up straight and made him stand at attention. The little fellow didn't say anything but went around the corner, took his Smoke helmet out of its satchel and put in a brick. Then he came back behind the big guard and fetched the satchel down on his head with all his might. "That will learn you to make me stand at attention when I don't want to," he said, and then beat it.

April 27, 1916

Weather good, "Standing to" all the time, both night and day. Germans putting on a "Straf" dropped a lot of bombs on the town last night, did quite a bit of damage. Had a hot "Bath" and clean change of underwear, then went to see a show in town, called the "Fancy's", real good. The Tommies put it on.

April 30, 1916

German guns are bombarding Poperinghe, had to move our horses. Two enemy planes came over and dropped a dozen big bombs on the town. Just saw a big shell hit under a freight car and throw it a hundred feet in the air. None of our men hit so far. Big Fisher and I took a walk looking at the damage done by the shells and bombs.

About Gladys Matheson

- Gladys Elizabeth Matheson was the first of nine children born to John and Elizabeth. She was born at the Onion Mission on September 27, 1892, the same year that the family settled in Onion Lake.
- Gladys's mother, Dr. Elizabeth (Scott) Matheson. Elizabeth was a teacher from the early age of seventeen, and became a physician after attending the Ontario Women's Medical College.
- Gladys's father, Reverend John Richard Matheson was a contractor before he became a missionary for the Anglican Church and was assigned to serve at St. Barnabas Mission in Onion Lake, NWT (became Saskatchewan in 1905).
- She attended the Kilborn Sister's school at Dunham Ladies College from 1906-1909; she returned home at seventeen to work on the mission.
- Gladys continued her formal education in Prince Albert, where she trained as a nurse beginning in 1911. Gladys returned home only seven months after she enrolled, because she felt she was needed more on the Mission.
- Gladys spent three years on the Mission after returning home from Prince Albert. She worked with her mother in the Mission's hospital, she taught in the Onion Lake School, she helped take care of her siblings, and she worked around the yard.
- Gladys was keen to finish her nurse's training, so she eventually traveled to Winnipeg in January of 1914 to finish at the Winnipeg General Hospital.
- Both her father and her fiancé (Gerald Barnes) died in 1916, while she was in Winnipeg, so proved to be a difficult time for Gladys. She managed to continue on with her education, and graduated in May of 1917, when she enlisted in the military service as a Nursing Sister.
- Awaiting service, Gladys worked in the Tuxedo Military Hospital in Winnipeg, where she cared for the returning soldiers. She was also a private nurse for Mr. Clarke, the president of the Grain Exchange. Gladys was well known as a very "competent and capable" nurse and would often be requested by doctors and patients alike to deliver nursing care.
- Gladys enlisted for military service on May, 25, 1917, and departed with the 25th Draft on December 12, 1917, as a Lieutenant Nursing Sister.
- Gladys arrived for duty on January 8, 1918, in Eastbourne, England, at the No. 14 Canadian General Hospital Operating Room.
- On May 6, 1918, Gladys was ordered to serve at the No. 3 Canadian General Hospital in Boulogne, France. Here she served in the Medical Ward for cases such as Pneumonia and "Shellshock". She was no longer in a hospital; the units were huts that were close to the front lines.
- Although the war ended on November 11, 1918, Gladys served in France until May 24, 1919, since there was the Spanish Flu epidemic after the War.
- Upon her return to Canada, she served another year back in Winnipeg at the Tuxedo Military Hospital.
- Gladys was demobilized in July, 1920, and went to Vancouver to nurse for some months there.
- In 1926, she married a U.S. Infantry officer in Hawaii, Sterling Crim, and remained with him in San Antonio, Texas until she moved back to Canada (to Winnipeg, Manitoba) in the 1980s after his death.

Context for the Gladys (née Matheson) Crim fonds

- From Saskatchewan Archives Board, R-E1395, Gladys (née Matheson) Crim fonds, including wartime diaries (1917-1919), reminiscences of wartime experiences, an autograph album, and photographs. These records were donated to Saskatchewan Archives in 1982, by Gladys's sister, Ruth M. Buck.

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Diary entries and reminiscences
of Gladys Matheson
are available online at

http://www.saskarchives.com/Great_War

About Charles Douglas “Dick” Richardson

- Born December 28, 1891, fifth of seven children born to Benjamin Parkin Richardson (a lawyer) and Margaret Ethel (née Austin) Richardson of Grenfell, Saskatchewan.
- After leaving public school, he worked as a school teacher for a year or two in the Moose Jaw area before becoming a student in the five year program at the Manitoba Agricultural College (M.A.C.) in Winnipeg.
- While at College, he was the president of his class, a keen debater, and editor of the college paper, The Gazette.
- In October 1915, he enlisted with the 4th University Company and went overseas in the spring of 1916 after graduating from the M.A.C. with a B.S.A.
- Served with the Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry as a lance corporal in Belgium, where he was wounded at the Battle of Sanctuary Wood on June 2, 1916. He spent several months recovering in England before returning to service in France.
- He died on April 9 or 10, 1917, as a result of wounds sustained at the Battle of Vimy Ridge.

Context for the Charles Douglas (Dick) Richardson fonds

- From Saskatchewan Archives Board, R-E4571, Transcribed letters of Charles Douglas (Dick) Richardson, 1915-1917. These letters were donated to Saskatchewan Archives in 1999. The excerpts from letters that are included in this package were written by Dick Richardson to Edna Chapman; and also by Pte Frank J. Whiting of P.P.C.L.I. to Mrs. B.P. Richardson, after her son Dick’s death in 1917.

**Saskatchewan Archives, R-E4571: Charles Douglas "Dick" Richardson Records
Excerpts from two of Dick Richardson's letters to Edna Chapman, 1916**

Letter #21

P.P.C.L.1. C.E.F. France

April 28, 1916

Dear Edna:

France at last – just exactly 6 months to the day from the time I enlisted. I shall always remember Easter Sunday this year for that was the day we spent crossing from England. It took us about 6 hours to cross the channel.

At the present moment I am sitting beside our tent using a pile of blankets for a writing desk. I cannot tell you everything that is here, but being the Base, the troops are here for only a week or 10 days before proceeding to the firing lines. I expect we shall go about a week from today. Upon arriving this far Steve and I found that Jim Brown had been gone about 3 weeks, so we are anxious to catch up to him again.

I can say this much about France, as much of it as I have seen that it compares very favorably with England, so you know it is very beautiful. The leaves are just coming out and the fruit trees are in blossom. I hope I shall have a chance to visit a few orchards here when the fruit ripens.

Our training camp is situated in such a position that we have a 2 mile march uphill with full pack every morning and the return trip each evening. The weather is fearfully hot, like a day in July in Sask. or Man. Today we had a route march of about 7 miles, and the sweat of an honest 10 days work was plainly in evidence at the finish.

It is interesting to look down the lines of tents just now and notice what the fellows are doing. At every angle and position imaginable, some are writing, others smoking and talking in groups, others are cleaning rifles, some are singing, particularly around the canteen, and so many other things peculiar to a military camp that a civilian would find a visit quite a novelty. We do not notice it ourselves. It is now about 7 o'clock and still quite light. Steve is in the tent. I think he has the bed made ready for me. We have a good bunch in the tent with us, all of our company. In fact I have enjoyed the week here so far very much.

I am getting a pass, (Steve & I, I should say) to go to town tomorrow. No doubt we shall have an interesting time trying to talk French. Steve has the advantage of me there, in having lived in Quebec so many years that he has learned a good deal of French. However I am learning.

During our march from the point where we landed a distance of about 6 miles, the French children flocked around us like sheep, asking for pennies, biscuits, bully beef, and souvenirs. They knew that much English anyway.

That reminds me that bully beef & biscuits form a very large part of our rations nowadays. I wish I could send you a biscuit as a souvenir. They are made from whole wheat flour and I believe are very wholesome. Their chief properties, however, are their lack of taste, and their resistance to external forces, for of all the creations of modern bakers they are absolutely the hardest. However a biscuit goes a long way with a bottle of water and a can of bully! I do not mind the fare at all. There is lots of grumbling, but that quality is only a sign of a good soldier.

We have every Thursday off ordinary duty for the purpose of cleaning up the lines, washing our clothes and generally trying to recall the fact that we used to be civilized.

Saturday afternoon is generally a holiday too and there is only church parade on Sunday so this may pretty properly be termed a 'rest camp'! Last but not greatest of all, we don't have to (blance?) equipment and polish brass and buttons. The ceremonial frills and useless formality of Shorncliffe days are done. What we do now is learn those things we need to know and forget the rest.

I have not heard from you for over 2 weeks but I expect there is a letter or two somewhere in this little world, that does not seem quite so large as it used to, so I shall wait.

Excuse pencil-circumstances you know-and keep an occasional line and thought coming in this direction. They will both be returned, the latter with interest.

Till next time,

Sincerely,

Dick

Letter #25

**No. 13. General Hospital,
Bologne, France**

June 5, 1916

Dear Edna:

Perhaps you have heard something about the time we have been having. I hope I never have to go through it again. It was simply Hell! I cannot tell you much about it now but I shall later. Our regiment was almost obliterated. About 40 of us came back out of the two companies that held the front line. No. 1 Company on our right were all either killed or taken prisoner, not a single man came back. No.2 which is the company I was in were able to hold them off all day and all night until their artillery leveled all our trenches and left us with only 40 men, many of them wounded. They got through the trenches on our right and got behind us opening up machine guns from both sides so that we were forced to retire on our left over 400 yards of open country, with the whole of it a mass of flame from bursting shells and swept by machine guns. I had to crawl most of the way as a piece of shrapnel early in the day had put me out of commission opening up my right side to the depth of my ribs and about 5 inches long and 2 inches wide. That is why I am now holding down one of the comfortable beds here in Bologne having been brought down by train last night. Next time I write I shall be in England, I expect, for my ticket reads that way.

It is such a relief to get away from bursting shells that even as helpless as I am, this is like heaven.

I shall write again soon and hope to hear from you, little girl.

As ever,

Sincerely

Dick

Saskatchewan Archives, R-E4571: Charles Douglas "Dick" Richardson Records

Copy of a letter from Pte Frank J. Whiting of P.P.C.L.I. to Mrs. B.P. Richardson, Grenfell, Saskatchewan

France, May 8 1917

Dear Madam,

No doubt the authorities will have notified you long ere this of the death of your son. I would have written sooner but it was not until this morning that I could get the few details I wanted. At this late date, I would hesitate to write, did I not know that there is always a certain amount of doubt about an official notification of death. Unfortunately in this case, there is not the slightest doubt as I saw the man who was with him at the end, and later buried him.

"Dick", as we called him at College and in the regiment was with his company when they made their heroic charge on Vimy Ridge on April 9th. They took the first three lines of trenches, and had got as far as the Fotic Wood on the crest of the Ridge when a German shell landed, killing two outright, and mortally wounding Dick. Two pieces passed into his abdomen, one piercing the bladder. Though badly hit, he walked part way to the dressing station, but was unable to complete the journey, and had to be carried on a stretcher. There he was laid in a partial shelter from flying fragments. He seemed in great pain for a time, though he said little, and only asked for a doctor. Unfortunately a medical officer could not be brought just then, but it would have been useless as he was dying even then. Half an hour or so later, the pain went away, and he seemed to fall asleep. This gently passed into unconsciousness, in which state he died.

As far as I can gather from questioning the stretcher bearers, he gave no final message when he knew he was dying, but if I can see anyone in the future whom he spoke to, I will send it on to you. That night he was buried in the wood and a white cross with his name and regiment marks the spot.

To me, Dick (I never learned his Christian name) was something more than my senior at College, or comrade-in-arms. He always typified everything that was straight and clean and worth while. I am a better man through having known him and many others can say the same. He was pure gold right through and possessed an intelligence that lifted him far above the petty things of life. When I welcomed back to the Company after his period in England, I chided him on coming out so soon after he was convalescent from his wound.

But apparently he thought he had not done quite his bit and could not hang around hospitals longer than he was absolutely obliged to.

In writing these few feeble lines, I have tried to convey to you the place your son held in the hearts of all who knew him. You, his mother, will appreciate him best, I know, and grieve the most, but there are many of us who claim the honour to share that feeling.

If it should be that I am spared to return to Canada, I should deem it a high privilege to meet and grasp the hand of the mother of "Dick" – Prince of men.

Believe me, I remain
Yours in deepest sympathy,
Frank J. Whiting

About James (Jim) C. Aitchison (also spelled Aitcheson)

- Born May 28, 1876, Innerleithen, Scotland
- Married to Elizabeth M. Aitchison
- Emigrated to Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, with his wife and children, in 1912
- Jim and Elizabeth had nine children; the youngest two children died of whooping cough while he was serving overseas.
- Carpenter by trade
- Enlisted in the armed services in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, on June 23, 1915
- Served as a Private in the Canadian Infantry (Quebec Regiment)
- Wounds suffered during active service in France in September or October of 1916
- Wrote to wife from hospital in Roy Herbert Hospital in Woolwich on October 3, 1916
- Died of wounds on October 15, 1916
- Buried in Innerleithen Cemetery, Peeblesshire, Scotland (United Kingdom), the town where he was born
- The loss of her husband and two small children during the war devastated Elizabeth. Elizabeth and her older children bore a heavy burden to support the large family in the years immediately following Jim's death. (Information from a letter to Saskatchewan Archives, June 8, 1998, from M.S. MacLean, granddaughter of Jim and Elizabeth Aitchison.)

Context for the James (Jim) C. Aitchison fonds:

From Saskatchewan Archives Board, S-A912, James Aitchison fonds. Jim's letters and other documents related to his active service were donated to Saskatchewan Archives Board in 1998 by his granddaughter.

Letters from Jim Aitchison to his wife, Elizabeth

No 441507
Pte J Aitchison
A Coy, 53rd Battalion
C.E. F.

Wed May 10th [1916]
Stationed at Bramshott Camp

My dear wife

I received yours and Ray's letters today, and am very sorry to see that baby is not thriving, poor little fellow. I hope by this time that he is better. I am also sorry to see that you are taking our separation so badly, I think that probably has something to do with baby's illness. Of course I don't want to be forgotten, but I really wish you could take it a bit better, try dear and look on the bright side, and look forward to the time when we will meet again. God knows I miss you too, but I always try to keep smiling. Yours of course is the hardest part, as the life we lead in the army is a cheery one. Try dear for the children's sake and mine, to buck up a little. I am also sorry to see about my little Nettie, and hope she is better again. I consider you did the best thing in getting Pringle to quit at the S.P. when it was hurting her health and if you can manage to give her a season at the Business College, it will be a fine thing, she deserves it, as she has been a good daughter to us, but you will have a struggle this summer. I am wearying to see Jim's photo, in his uniform, he will make a good soldier. Glad that Elsie is getting on at school and will be able to take her entrance this summer, I will have to save up the \$5 that I promised, I must be getting behind a bit, I still owe Jim \$1, and I have not sent the children's dollar, for a while, but I don't know how they pay us here, as all I have got to date is £4, and I had \$14-10 coming when I left Canada. We have all got pay books here, but it is an awkward business counting it up, as our pay is \$1-10 a day and of course we are paid sterling. I borrowed 3s when I went to Scotland, and I paid Bella £1 of our old a/c. and I still have about \$5/ left so, didn't spend so much on my trip. I promised to send £1 occasionally to Innerleithen. You have no idea how kind everyone was there. I saw Old Mrs. Johnstone going to the station one night, and went down with her, I was to go to Walkerburn and see her besides, but did not manage it. Now dear don't worry about me as I am perfectly safe yet, and after all there are other ways of dying besides being killed in battle anyway we have a just cause, and it is worth any
.....¹

¹ Please note that there are page(s) missing from this letter. It ends abruptly, without a closing or signature.

No 441507
Pte J Aitchison
A Coy, 53rd Battalion C.E. F.
Bramshott Camp
Sat May 27th 1916

My dear wife

Just a few lines to let you know that I am still in the land of the living and feeling in the best of health. I am wearying to hear how, Ella Norma & Nettie, are keeping I hope they don't take anything else along with the whooping cough, and that it does not drag out long. Your last letter telling me of Baby's death, has made me a bit homesick, and if I could get out of the army and across to you I think I would go. However I suppose I am in it now till the end, and we will have to keep up our hearts, and hope the end will not be long. I sent your letter on to Tina, telling her in turn to send it to Innerleithen as you give the news much better than I could and there was nothing in it but anyone might read. I had a letter from Tina saying she had sent on 3 little remmits she had knitted for the children. She is knitting a pair of socks for me also. How are you bearing up dear under your trial, you think it is bad for me, but I know it is you who will suffer most, as you are always so fond of a young baby. He was a dear little fellow, but maybe he hasn't missed much, as life isn't all roses by any means. We got back here from the ranges on Tuesday, I did fairly well at the shooting, and passed as a first class shot with 20 points to spare, I missed being a marksman however by 15 points, still I am a long way above the average, so I am well enough pleased. I have been doing a bit carpenter work these last three days, and hope it will last a while as it is a nice change, and of course we don't have to go very hard. I think you had all the children insured but suppose you won't get much as he was so young. How are you getting on during the Quarantine², does Pringle and Ray sleep out, or how do you manage. I see Conscription comes into force here in June, I believe if they had it at the first the war would have been over by now. I have never had a medical exam yet, but anyway I don't think they will turn me down now. I will close now as there is really nothing here to write about. Hoping the children are some better and that the rest of you are well

I remain yours forever

Jim

How about your own trouble you haven't mentioned it lately,

² There was a polio epidemic that resulted in quarantine in 1916, impacting both Canada and the United States.

No 441507, 4th Company 14th Canadian Battalion
3rd Brigade, 1 Can. Division
Somewhere in France

June 17th 1916

My dear Wife

Just a few lines to let you know, that I am still in the land of the living, and thinking of you, I am always thinking of you, I haven't had a letter since leaving England, the one telling me of dear Nettie's death, isn't it hard to lose her she was such a darling. Well dear, I am at the front now, and I hope for your and the children's sake, I will come safely through it, let us hope that the war will soon be over, and that we will be reunited. This is a Montreal Regt, that I am in now, and they are or have been mostly French Canadians, but of course they are getting mixed up now, with drafts. They are fine fellows, however, and lots of them have been through quite a lot. We are under shell fire all the time, but it is strange how soon one gets used to it. We don't get much news here but I hear that Russia is doing very well, so that it may not be very long before Fritz has to give in let us hope so. I am in the best of health, and hope that you and the children are well. I will close now and will write a longer letter when I get back to the rest camp.

Love to all

Your loving husband
Jim

No 441507
Pte J. Aitchison
No 4 Coy
14th Can. Battalion
3rd Brigade
1st Can Division
The Front
France

My dear wife

I got back to the rest camp last night, none the worse of my first experience at the Front. It is wonderful how cool a fellow feels up there, I have been more scared many a time when out on a salmon exploit. All the same I am glad to be back, where we don't hear the guns as much, and where we don't see any shells explode. I didn't sleep well last night, thinking of you all, I had a look at the picture, and I remembered how bright Nettie was when it was taken and that I gave her a shake because she wouldn't sit still. I hope she didn't remember it. I can't keep my eyes dry when I think of her. I haven't had a letter since coming to

France, but I don't think any of the 53rd have, I hope there is no more bad news when I do get one. Now, dear, try and worry as little as possible about me, and try and keep up for the children's sake, I know it is hard to do, but remember you are all they have to look to. I wish I could take you in my arms and comfort you in this terrible affliction. I will not be greatly surprised if I am sent back to the base, as some of the non-coms are talking about me being deaf, and saying I should not be here. I know you would be glad if I am sent there but don't get too elated about it, as that is all I have to go by. Anyway I might pull through alright, as there are some in this Regt, who have been in and out the trenches for 16 months and have never had a scratch, on the other hand of course, some got laid out the first day, let us hope for the best, it can't last such a long time now, as Austria seems to be about all in. I hear that the 65th are either in England or going there soon to reinforce the 53rd, if so Pringle will lose her boy. As this is all the paper I have I will close now and will write again, before our next turn at the front.

Your ever loving husband

Jim

No 441507

July 1st 1916

Pte J Aitchison. No 4 Coy. 14th Can. Batt

3rd Brigade. 1st Can. Division

The Front. France

My dear wife

We have arrived back at the rest camp, after another spell of the trenches, so that I am alright for a few days again. There were quite a few, old 53rd men killed and wounded this time, but our company was very fortunate as we had very few casualties. I have never had a letter from anywhere since coming to France, and am wearying very much on one, especially from you. I thought I would not have much time to think, when on active service, but there are hours and hours in the trenches, when we have nothing to do, but lie in our dug-outs, and my thoughts are of home all the time. I hope you are bearing up well, under our bereavements, and that the first awful sting is gone. I can hardly believe yet, that they are gone from us forever naturally of course I grieve most for Nettie, as she was older, but I am very sorry also for the loss of our wee son. You will be wondering how I like it at the front, well I think, the less said about it the better, as I expected, it is no picnic, and the sooner it is over, the better I will be pleased, it is sad coming back to the rest camp and hearing about fellows we know being killed. However we will have to go through with it now, and if we are suffering so are our enemies. I find my deafness a great handicap at the front, as they speak low there, and I can't hear the orders at all sometimes, especially after a sharp bombardment, I am almost totally deaf for a long time. I don't know what Batt. J Green is in now, but he will have been in the trenches once or twice by this time. The Regt that Bill is in was to arrive here this morning from the front line, so I will

possibly see him tonight. How are you all keeping? I hope the little ones have got over their trouble, and things are going better with you now. I expect to get quite a lot of letters from you soon, as I suppose they are being held up at the Base until they can trace me. Tell the children that I am unable to send their dollar now, as we only get one franc (20 cents) a day here, the rest is held back. We get tobacco and matches served out though, also cigarettes and as we can only spend money while at camp it is enough. I wrote to mother last time I was back, and will write to Tina & Bella this time, I will close now, hoping this war will soon be over, and that I will soon be back in Saskatoon beside you. I remain
Your ever loving husband
Jim

No 441507
Pte J Aitchison
No 4 Coy. 14th Can Batt
3rd Brigade 1st Can Div
The Front
France

Aug 9th 1916

My dear wife

I received your letter dated July 20th also the parcel containing towel, socks & tobacco. I have got two parcels from you to date. Well, dear, about sending parcels, I have as many socks as I require for the present, and as we have to carry everything about with us, don't send any more meantime, also about tobacco, although we don't get McDonalds, we get as much as we can use of other kinds, so there is no use of you spending your money sending that, but, a little cake, if you could make it in a little tin, and send it tin and all, would be very acceptable, as of course we don't get anything of that kind. I am sorry to see that they have reduced your P.V. so much, I thought they had deducted for the two children in the spring, and it seems to me that they have stopped the allowance for them twice over. It doesn't seem fair to me, as I have to keep up my end of the bargain they might keep theirs. Glad to see that W. McBain, is only a prisoner, although that is bad enough, still they can only keep him until the end of the war, and he is two years ahead of these poor fellows who were captured at the retreat from Mons. Yes, this is rather a hard life, long marches in Heavy Marching Order, sleeping in damp dugouts, etc, it is a wonder there is not a lot sickness, but there isn't, it is wonderful what men can stand, except for my deafness, I am in the best of health. I am getting used to hearing shells explode now, but still I don't like it, they are nasty things when they drop near, still Fritz has to stand more of that than we have, and I don't suppose he likes it either. Pringle was praising Lizzie & Jim for the way they have worked in the gardens, they are good workers, and I hope they have good results. I am pleased to see

that you are taking an interest in things again, I was afraid it would crush you entirely, as it must have been an awful blow. I don't know that I have much more to say, I hope the war won't last long and that I will be beside you before long.

Your ever loving husband

Jim

Somewhere in France

Sept 13th 1916

My dear wife

I received your letter dated Aug 21st with the shot of Nettie enclosed. Yes it will seem strange, to have no one but Norma about the house, now that the rest are back at school, and you will feel lonely, but time is a great healer and you must not let your health down, for the sake of the rest. I longed very much to be beside you in our time of trouble, but that was not to be, and we have to make the best of it. You always tell me to let you know what to send, well, there is a powder called French Powder, some of the boys get, and if you can get it in Canada, you send lots of it, as at present I am unable to sleep for vermin, it is fierce. My health keeps good, and though we have had some heavy marches, I always manage to keep going with the rest. I haven't got a parcel from the U.S.A. yet, but have had two from Innerleithen, and one from Newcastle, besides those you sent, so I have nothing to complain about. I am glad to see that you are getting the place painted, and wish I had been at home to help you. How is the harvest out west this year, I heard that farmers were paying \$4 a day, if that is true, the soldiers on harvest leave will be making a good stake. You ought to see them cutting grain here, with a scythe, and thrashing with a flail, I had no idea they were so far behind in France, I never saw the flail used before, but have heard of it. I will close now hoping you are all keeping well

Your loving husband

Jim

Somewhere in France

Sept 21st 1916

My dear wife

Just a few lines to let you know that I am still alive and well, and am receiving my mail pretty regular now. You have no idea how nice it is to get a letter or parcel from home. The next parcel you send you might send some chewing tobacco instead of smoking, as we get all the smoking we can use. I know you don't like me chewing, but we are not allowed to smoke at night in the trenches, and it is a weary time from darkness till daylight. I haven't seen J Green, but hear he is alright so far, I haven't heard anything about W. Souter, but his regt is within 2 miles of us now, I may see them soon. Last year at this time I was home on harvest leave, we had a great time then, didn't we. Let us hope it won't be long

before we are home for good. I see the German press is beginning to squeal about us sending them so many shells, they say it is butchery, I consider that a good sign, it certainly is fierce, the amount of shells we send over, and though it is bad enough in our lines, it must be terrible in theirs. It is beginning to get a little cold at night. I hope the darned thing is over before the winter sets in, as it must be miserable then, however, some of the boys have been here two winters, so I must not grumble. Tell Mrs. Forrester I was asking for them. I see by the Peebleshire Standard [that] Walter Redpath is killed. I think that is the last of Jack's family by his first wife. He was a soldier when they left for Canada, and has been in France from the start. I will close now with love to you and the children. Your ever loving husband
Jim

Roy Herbert Hospital
Woolwich
Oct 3rd 1916

My dear wife

I had to stop the last letter rather suddenly, so I am writing again. I was under the xrays yesterday, and nurse tells me that I have a large piece of metal in my leg. I am inclined to think it may be a piece of high explosive shell that got me, not that it matters, only if so it will be a more ragged wound. Fancy I walked miles over very rough ground with it. I did not become a stretcher case until I reached Boulogne, I was hobbling about with a stick, when one of the doctors there, said, "Put that man on a stretcher." Well, dear, I have been lucky, I am not injured permanently, and if you saw some of the poor fellows, you would thank God, that I have got off so lightly. Oh how pleasant it is to lie in a clean bed, after the beds I have lain on these last 4 months, I think I would soon have been knocked up, I could not sleep at night for lice, I am sure there thousands on me, I used to lie and pick them off the whole night. They kept me off my sleep worse than the shells. Well I am alright now for some time to come, and it is possible owing to my deafness they may not send me to the front again. Well dear I think we have got the Germans beat now, there does not seem to be any fight left in their infantry. I did not get over to the German trench, but some who did tell me, that they either bolted, or held up their hands. It was a wonderful sight to see our boys going through that hell in extended order, and makes me more than ever proud of our race. I am pleased to see by Pringle's letter that the Garden is such a success, and that you have so many potatoes. I expect my mail will follow me here, but I have had none so far. I have written to Bella, and will likely get a letter from here in a day or two. I will close now.

With love from your ever loving husband

Jim