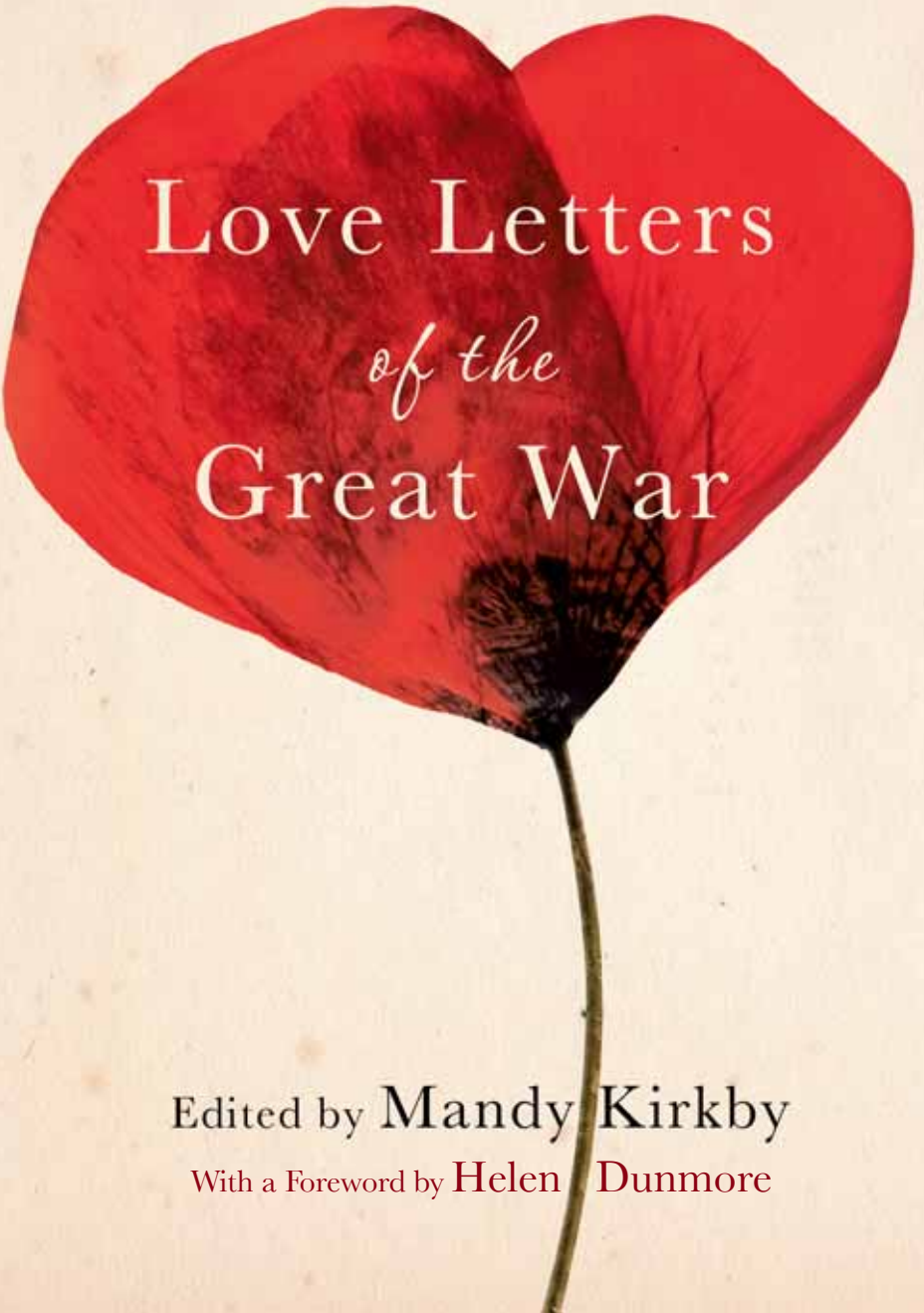
Love Letters
of the
Great War
Edited by Mandy Kirkby
With a Foreword by Helen Dunmore

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Foreword

In December 1914, the largest wooden structure in the world was erected by the Post Office, within Regent's Park. This was the London Home Depot, where bags of mail for troops on the Western Front were sorted. It covered five acres and employed thousands of Post Office workers.

We understand that the First World War was fought on a scale and in a style never before seen; what is perhaps less familiar is the complex, sophisticated infrastructure that made such warfare feasible. The war became its own world, with its own hospitals, army schools and transport system, its own courts, prisons, workshops and communications. New technology and systems developed quickly under the pressure of need.

The efficient delivery of letters and parcels to serving soldiers was given high priority. On the Western Front, in particular, the static nature of trench warfare and established lines of communication made it possible for post to be delivered with startling rapidity. Again and again, letters home describe perishable food received in good – or fairly good – condition. In fact, as William Munton writes to his wife on

Boxing Day 1916 from 'Somewhere in France', the postman has praised her packing of the parcel: 'If everybody packed their parcels like that there would be less bad language used at the post office.' Close to twenty thousand bags of mail crossed the Channel each day.

As this collection of love letters makes clear, the same longing for letters, the same acute desire for a taste or touch of home, were expressed wherever the war penetrated. In Turkey, France, Italy, Russia, the USA, Germany and all the countries of the British Empire, husbands, wives and sweethearts devoted hours of thought to the post. To and fro went tunic buttons, photographs, picture postcards, soap, tins of ointment, oranges, OXO cubes, poems, pastries, and, above all, words that struggled to link the lives severed by war.

For as long as it took to read or write a letter, a soldier might think himself back into the world of home. Tired of 'so much masculine companionship', Captain W. D. Darling sends a few lines to his wife, telling her that his love for the 'freedom and camaraderie' of camp life has turned to hatred in the light of his longing to 'play with you, fondle you, and then seduce you'. Within a single letter, a soldier describes the beauty of the moon in its fleece of cloud, and lists what he needs in his next parcel from home: candles, rice and potted meat. Lovers write of dreams and desires, fears, depressions, the contrivances of their daily lives, faith and separation, and endless, endless waiting. Sometimes they are amusingly practical: 'I am getting more and more excited

at the thought of seeing you on Tuesday. What are we going to do with Mother? We must lose her sometimes!' Letters may take the writer back 'to the old sweetheart days', but sometimes they are cries of agony, as when Amy Handley writes to Private John George Clifton: '– My heart – Surely it will burst – Jack – Jack – I want you –'. Tender, earthy, heart-rending, ardent, crammed with news, humour, rage and longing, the love-letters collected in this anthology bring to life a lost world.

One of the most poignant messages is one dropped into the English Channel in a ginger beer bottle by Private Thomas Hughes, on his way to France in September 1914. The simplicity of the note, which is sent 'just to see if it will reach you', is striking. This doubt about whether or not written words will 'reach' those for whom they are meant is common to many writers of the love letters here. There is anxiety that long absence will destroy the mutual understanding from which the relationship grew. There is the painful awareness that words are no substitute for touch, and that even the most lyrical, erotic evocation of the loved one's body will not bring it an inch closer. Above all, there is the fear of death, and final separation. Often, the foreboding was justified. Gunner Frank Bracey wrote to his sweetheart, Win, in May 1916: 'I am writing this because I have a feeling that I shall not come back again. You may think I am a bit taped writing this dear but I cannot help it. If I do come back dearest you will never see this letter but I have a strong feeling today that I shall never see England again . . . My last

wish is that you marry a good man and to be happy and to think of your Humble now and then.' He was killed in action on the Western Front three months later.

Like Gunner Bracey, many of these letter writers show poignant humility about their own fate. Fears for themselves are over-ridden by the desire that those they love should 'be happy'. Soldiers downplay physical hardship, pain, danger and self-doubt; wives and sweethearts downplay loneliness, poverty or the difficulties of coping alone with home and children. But sometimes the struggle to protect the beloved from the rawness of the writer's experience is overwhelmed by a greater need to share it. Gunner Wilfrid Cove writes to his wife Ethel a compelling description of the shattered villages among which he is fighting. He asks her to imagine that she is standing in her own village, 'say where the pillar-box is', among shell-holes 'big enough to hold a couple of large motor omnibuses', in a landscape where 'every single thing upon it is directly appertaining to war'. However, eloquent though he is, Cove knows he cannot – and perhaps should not – 'adequately describe' the world in which he now finds himself. He ends with a paragraph about the 'excellent to the last' sausage rolls that Ethel has sent, and reassures her that her wrist-watch is still 'going strong' under bombardment. Home and 'somewhere in France', domesticity and industrialized warfare, are just about held in balance in this letter. Private Maurice Drans, however, describes to his fiancée Georgette Clabault the overwhelming horror of 'an open mine of innumerable

scattered corpses without tombs, a mass grave open to the crawling worms . . . violated naked flesh.'

Official censorship, as well as intuitive self-censorship, must be borne in mind when reading these letters. In Britain, the Defence of the Realm Act 1914 legislated for the censorship of private correspondence from soldiers at the front. Junior officers read the men's letters and stamped them as censored. The Post Office also carried out censorship of soldiers' mail at base camps. The letters in this collection, intimate and revealing as they appear, were written in the knowledge that other eyes than the addressee's might read them. Privacy is one more casualty of the war, but many correspondents ignore that fact. They write as if their private loves were still supreme and inviolable, and perhaps they had good reason. The war could take everything from them, at any moment. A few words scribbled before a trench raid might be all that would survive to convey their love.

Helen Dunmore, October 2013

Introduction

A great many of the letters in this book have never been published before and have been dug out of archives and brought into the light of day for the first time in decades. Researching original material is a time-consuming business, and finding these love letters has involved many hours of trawling through what are called 'Private Papers'. These are the documents relating to an individual's wartime experience, donated to museums and archives, usually by a relative once the original recipient has died. The contents of Private Papers can be very varied and truly surprising, anything from service records and notifications of death to army-issue French phrase books, leave passes and, of course, personal letters home – to parents and friends, to wives and sweethearts.

Some preliminary legwork has already been done for the researcher in the form of the archivist's catalogue entries. These follow certain conventions, however, carefully and objectively describing the items in the Papers, and only sometimes is there a hint of the true nature of what lies within. A collection of letters might be described as

'poignant' or 'personal' but this doesn't really express how fiery or eloquent, intimate or magical the contents might turn out to be.

Research rooms in archives and museums tend to be very similar – low lighting, plain and simple surroundings, temperature-controlled, practical and suited to the purpose. You sit in your allotted place and wait for the requested material to be brought up from the storeroom. Then the box arrives. Inside, cardboard folders tied with cotton ribbon hold letters and documents, but often there are other objects in the box, the flotsam and jetsam of a wartime life – delicate trinkets folded in tissue, a photograph album or an intriguingly bulky envelope – all treasures waiting to be revealed.

There were some objects that particularly thrilled and surprised me – a stationery set with its writing paper still inside, an officer's swagger stick ('the end chewed off by a dog', according to the note in the file), an embroidered silk postcard 'To My Darling', a leather wallet, a faded handkerchief, an envelope full of pieces of shrapnel (astonishingly heavy). Then there were the photographs, of handsome young men in uniform and demure-looking girls in their best dresses – and one in a locket, on the reverse of which was scribbled 'Only au revoir, beloved. Only au revoir'.

These mementoes and ephemera merely hint at what's to come: the letters are the real heart of the matter. They are such simple things, just paper and pencil and ink, many of them faded with age, but time and again I was bowled over

by the wonderful and astonishing things people said in them, and under such terrible circumstances.

Occasionally, it felt odd to be reading such personal letters. I was a little embarrassed by Amy Handley's awful distress at being separated from Jack, and I felt I really shouldn't be reading the anonymous conscientious objector's erotic evocation of his lover, or Cicely Marriott's lovely little note to her husband telling him that they'd had a baby girl.

Friends often asked, 'Isn't it making you rather sad? Don't they all die in the end?' Well, no, they didn't all die in the end: many survived and their love was no doubt the stronger for it. Robert Block's joyous letter to his sweetheart written when peace was declared made me happy all day and very, very glad – like him – to be alive.

Yet it was hard not to feel emotional when faced with a very sad letter, and I frequently told myself off for being self-indulgent. After all, these things happened so long ago, it felt silly to be affected by them. And then I came across something in the Wilfrid Cove papers.

The file consisted of a small collection of letters between a husband, wife and young daughter, and in them, the warmth and closeness of this family was unmistakable. It was obvious early on that Wilfrid hadn't survived the war, and this was sad enough, but then right at the bottom of the archive box I saw a white envelope.

Out came a small, squashed block of letters and photographs merged together in a single mass, the edges all dirty and torn, and uppermost was a picture of a little girl in a

fairy dress. It then became clear: Wilfrid had probably kept these letters and photographs in his tunic pocket and the squashed appearance and damage must have been from the impact of the shell that had killed him.

I was finding it quite hard to fight back the tears when I turned to the archivist's typed note from thirty or so years before, when the collection was first donated to the archive. As the usual practice dictated, the archivist had carefully outlined the contents, but this time he had added a few extra lines: 'Reading this record one feels one gets to know this living, lively family, and it is an emotional experience. The tragedy of Gunner Cove's death could not have happened to a nicer and closer family. I am privileged to have been "involved" infinitesimally in their lives.'

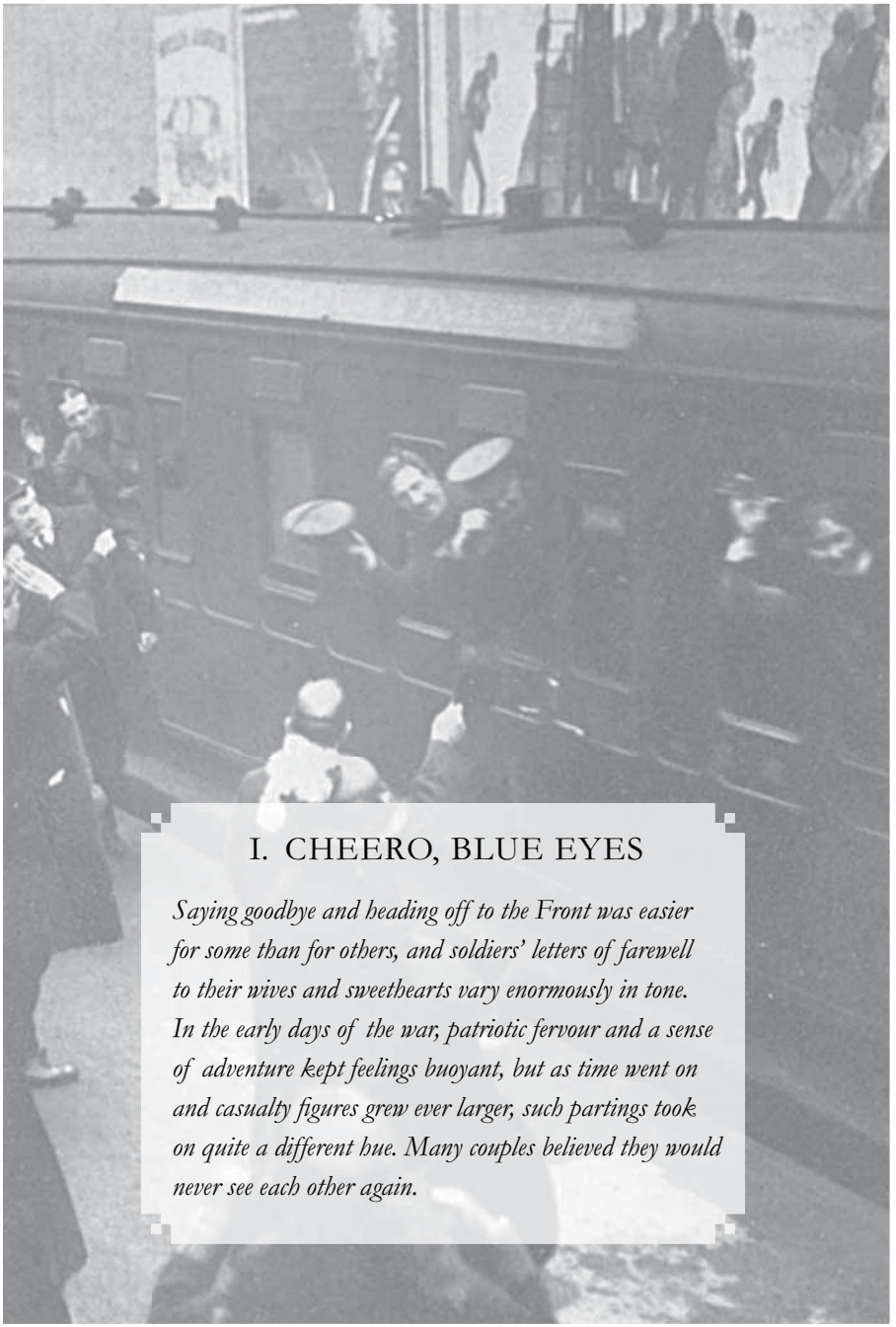
He too had been affected by the Cove family, and how could this not be so? It isn't foolish at all to be affected by long-past tragedies; we are human and, especially where love is concerned, we can't help but feel an emotional link going right back through the years.

Many of the sons and daughters of these long-ago lovers and letter writers are still alive, and for them, of course, the link is direct. In correspondence with these relatives, I was told the same story many times: they had had no idea of the existence of the letters, often no idea of the existence of the sweetheart who had been killed. It was only after the recipient had died that the correspondence came to light – ribbon-tied bundles found in the attic or hidden at the back of a drawer. 'My mother was very private' and 'We never knew' were very typical responses.

These women had held on to their letters because their love was something wonderful that had happened to them, something worth preserving, even in secret. I hope that by bringing so many letters out from the archives, we can acknowledge these couples all over again and, like the Cove family archivist, have the privilege of being involved, albeit infinitesimally, in their love.

Mandy Kirkby, October 2013

Love Letters of the Great War



I. CHEERO, BLUE EYES

Saying goodbye and heading off to the Front was easier for some than for others, and soldiers' letters of farewell to their wives and sweethearts vary enormously in tone. In the early days of the war, patriotic fervour and a sense of adventure kept feelings buoyant, but as time went on and casualty figures grew ever larger, such partings took on quite a different hue. Many couples believed they would never see each other again.

Corporal Alfred Chater to Joyce Francis

Alfred Chater was already a volunteer soldier with a London regiment when war broke out in August 1914. He was called up immediately for active service and, after three months' training, was sent to France. From his training camp, he sent a letter to his sweetheart on the eve of departure.

Oct 25th 1914
Trowley House
Abbots Langley

Darling Joy,

I must write you one more line dearest to say goodbye before we go, as god knows when I shall see you again. I am so awfully glad we are going – it is what we have been waiting for for so long and it has come so much sooner than we expected or hoped. I heard about it yesterday afternoon when I was going home; I called at our headquarters at Euston where I found the 2nd Battalion being got together and was told the 1st Btn were to leave for France on Monday. I think there is not much doubt that we are really going: we were served out with new rifles this afternoon and we believe that we shall be at Southampton tomorrow night.

I wish I could have seen you today and I can't bear the thought of going without saying goodbye to you but perhaps it is better as it is. So now dear it is goodbye and may we meet again if god wills. You know that if I am allowed to come back I shall feel exactly the same to you as I do now and shall be ready for you whenever you can come to me and you know that I shall come straight to you and ask you directly I come back.

It's a funny game this war! We are all fairly shouting with joy at going and I daresay we shall soon be cursing the day and then when we get back we shall say we have had the time of our lives. Goodbye darling, may god bless and keep you.

Goodbye little girl.

Micky

Lieutenant Geoffrey Boothby to Edith Ainscow

Geoffrey Boothby had only just met Edith Ainscow when he was sent to the Front where he served with the Royal Engineer Tunnellers. Edith was very young, only seventeen, and Geoffrey not much older at twenty. They had spent just four days together and theirs was very much a fledgling romance, which would, in part, account for the breezy tone of the letter.

8th S. Staffords
B.E.F.
France

Postmarked 26 July 1915

Darling,

You now have a real live 'lonely soldier somewhere in France'. Only he's not very lonely. Also it's beastly conceited to imagine you hadn't got several others. Let us say 'another – er – boy in France'. Also please forgive him, if he's not feeling depressed or homesick. He's not. Never been more excited in his life before.

You see we're waiting way back behind the firing line for our turn for a little amateur scrapping. Knowing you as I do (having been in your company for, I believe, a period of

four incomplete days all told), knowing you as I do, I repeat, I feel certain you will condone this temporary lapse from heartbrokenness under which I am supposed to stagger.

Only once have I strafed the Germans for bringing me out here to make a nuisance of myself & that was when I got your telegram, which got here yesterday by the way.

However, it's not much use kicking up a row about it, Kitchener's not one of my intimates, so I'll have to pass it over this time & qualify to be a divinity by your method – forgiveness.

To come to some real news, we've had a mixed sort of time since we came out. Easy billets & some very mouldy marching.

The men stuck it damn well. We had a long march under the most trying conditions for some of them especially those with tender feet. The notorious pavé or cobbled roads are the last word. As usual our regt. came off easily best in marching, having two fall out against eighty-two of another regt. Some boys, ours. Grousing all the while, but sticking to it like Trojans. We are now within sound of the big guns & sight of aerial scraps, which seem to occur every evening. Haven't seen one brought down yet.

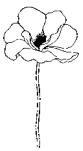
We have great fun getting the inhabitants to execute our wishes. I haven't been stumped yet, though I can't understand a word they answer. We have been issued with a blue book of useful sentences which strange to relate ARE useful. I stride into a new billet, rap out my stock phrase, vide book & thenceforward carry on with patchy sentences or scattered

words. Works, though, you'ld be surprised at the powers of understanding these people have.

Well, I suppose we're fixtures here for a month or two. Happy Days!

Cheero, Blue Eyes,

Geoff



Lieutenant Erwin von Freiherr Pflanzer-Baltin to Violet Murchison

On the day Germany declared war on France, twenty-one-year-old Erwin von Freiherr Pflanzer-Baltin of the Austro-Hungarian army wrote to his English fiancée whilst on a train journeying towards Belorussia on the Eastern Front. Erwin's tone is very serious; he's certainly not rejoicing at the prospect of going to war. He is aware of the dangers he is about to face and it probably hasn't escaped his notice that, even if he survives, their relationship will be difficult to sustain, given that they are on opposing sides. He wishes he has a better photograph of Violet: 'I must make do with the little one, which I always have next to my heart and will have till I die.' Ten days later, he was killed in action.

Oderberg
3.VIII.1914
Belorussia

Miss Violet Murchison
Wyke House
Isleworth
London
England

Journey to Galicia

My most dearly beloved Baby!

Don't be angry that I haven't written for so long, but now that we are at war there is so terribly much to do that I scarcely know whether I'm coming or going. On 1st August I became a lieutenant, and leaving my comrades was very hard and full of emotion, because they are all off to the war, and who knows whether we will ever see each other again. I can't write any better than this, because I am in a moving train. I wanted to join my regiment yesterday and was given orders to go to Göding to the 6th Squadron. I entrained my horses in Vienna and travelled to Göding. When I reached Göding everything was already entrained and the regiment left at 11.30 pm for the Russian frontier. I had to stay in Göding and wait for my horses, which were late and didn't arrive until 1.30 am. I then got into the horsebox with them and have spent all of last night and today there and have

all of tonight, before I arrive tomorrow morning. War has reached me already as I am sleeping in the straw, and instead of going on leave to England to my beloved Baby I'm off to Russia, and God grant that we will see each other again. Pray for your Erwin: when he is in the greatest danger he will always think of you. It's a pity that you didn't give me a better photograph of yourself, so that I must make do with the little one, which I always have next to my heart and will have till I die.

I haven't heard from you for such a long time, my sweet Baby, please write to me at the front very very often. I shall let you know the address of the forces post office and then you can write to me. But don't be angry, my sweet darling, I shall never be able to tell you where I am or what I am doing, because that is classified and forbidden on pain of court-martial.

I shall send you word of me as often as I can, but if you don't hear anything from me for a long time, you will know that I have been killed for the Fatherland. Never stop thinking of your Erwin, and pray for him, for his thoughts are with you every moment and he will fight with all his heart with you in his thoughts, sweet Baby.

Write to me very often, for I am so unhappy that I might have to lose you and perhaps never be able to see you again. I think of you and kiss your little picture, and close my letter with the request to give your dear mother my heartfelt regards, and remain, embracing you tenderly with my warmest greetings and kisses, loving you for ever faithfully and sincerely, your

Erwin