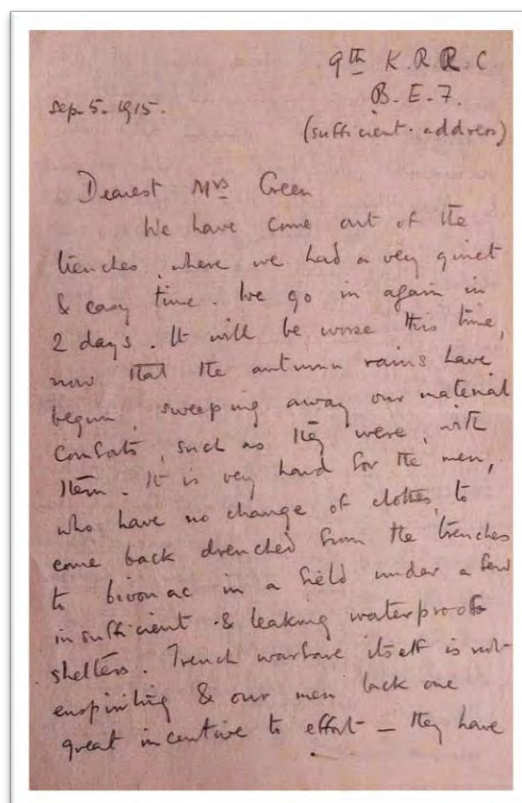


History Hub
From the Archives
2018



A Letter from the
Trenches to
Alice Stopford Green
National Library of Ireland
Ms. 15094

Twenty-five letters to Alice Stopford Green from the war front in France, 1915-1917, with copies of other letters on the war collected by her as material for lectures.
National Library of Ireland, Ms. 15, 120/1

They have not been trained long enough to have pride in their regiment.

In this month's 'From the Archive' series, we examine a letter to Alice Stopford Green from a soldier in the trenches of the First World War. Robin Holloway, writing in 1915, was a member of the 9th **Battalion of the King's Royal Rifle Corps. This regiment**, originally raised in Winchester in August of 1914, saw action in France along the Western Front and until it was disbanded in August of 1918. Green, an Irish Nationalist and Historian, wrote many letters to Irish soldiers at the front lines of the Great War. In this example from Holloway, it is clear that by 1915 the gloom of the trenches had become too much for many soldiers to endure. Rumours of the terrible conditions in the trenches often reached back to the home front, and greatly disturbed the men who awaited their deployment onto the front line. Holloway writes **of his own regiment, '[i]t is very hard for the men, who have no change of clothes, to come back drenched from the trenches to being in a field under a few insufficient and leaking waterproof shelters'**. Trench life involved long periods of boredom mixed with brief periods of terror. The threat of death kept soldiers constantly on edge, while poor living conditions and lack of sleep wore away at their health and stamina. Random shelling and sniping characterized trench warfare, while the enemy remained largely hidden and soldiers often felt powerless arbitrary and sudden death.

An important issue that Holloway raises in his letter to Green is that some of the enlisted men lacked the motivation and bond which would make them a stronger unit. He writes, **'[t]rench warfare itself is not inspiring & our men lack one great incentive to effort – they have not been trained long enough to take pride in their regiment & not being recruited from one county, like many regiments, they have no pride of county to keep them up.'** A general lack of morale, as well as the absence of a common background among the soldiers created a **regiment that, in Holloway's opinion, lacked cohesion and pride. For these men to endure the awful conditions of the trenches and be successful in their campaigns, sufficient training was essential. It would provide the soldiers with a sense of pride for their battalion and connection to their fellow soldiers. For Holloway, it seems that this sense of bonding and pride was insufficient for the soldiers of the 9th K.R.R.C. The tone of Holloway's letter generally lacks a sense of high morale, he notes that, '[i]t certainly requires a good deal of effort not to lose heart', and also calls the war effort a 'gigantic waste of energies.'**

At the beginning of the war in 1914, it was thought that victory would be short, sharp and decisive. Ireland in 1914 sat at the brink of civil war between the supporters of the Union and the advocates of Home Rule. In regards to the Great War, however, it was accepted that **Ireland's destiny was linked to that of the British Empire. Despite his belief in Home Rule for Ireland, John Redmond, a Nationalist MP and leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, had no doubts as to where the real interests of Ireland lay. He believed that Ireland should support England to the maximum degree, thereby demonstrating a loyalty and friendship that was certain to be rewarded after the guns stopped shooting. Redmond and many more members of the party hoped that the shared experience of the trenches might reconcile unionists and nationalists. He likewise saw the war as an opportunity for wielding both unionists and nationalists together. All these men fought in British uniforms but were Irishmen who believed they were not just fighting for Britain, but for their country. He wanted to raise an all-Irish force with its own officers and colours, to be used both in defense of the state and on the continent.**

Despite Redmond's belief that Irish support of the British war effort would benefit the country, involvement in the war did not keep with popular opinion and within nationalist **Ireland. The most vocal opposition to Redmond's policies came from the Sinn Fein** movement. Arthur Griffith warned nationalists that an English victory in the war would be **more powerful and would threaten Ireland's claim to nationhood. Griffith also feared that if** England lost the war, and Ireland identified with its cause, they would share the punishment. Ultimately, around 210,000 Irishmen of both Unionist and Nationalist persuasion joined the British forces and, for different and often conflicting reasons, fought the Germans, Turks and Bulgarians in the First World War.

Enthusiasm for the war effort did not last until the armistice in 1918. As Britain moved further into war morale had started to decline among the Irish and the British. The conditions that troops endured while in battle were both stressful and monotonous, as Holloway notes in his letter to Green. **He writes that '[i]t is odd to be living an existence where there is really nothing to look forward to, & where one is driven back entirely in the activity of the moment & on one's inner determination in the intervals of action.'** For Holloway, the **one reprieve from life at war was 'the knowledge that the life one is fighting for is going on now uninterrupted.'**

The Great War ended three years later on 11 November 1918, marking the end of a dark **chapter in Europe's history. The letters received by Alice Stopford Green during this period**

continue to give insight into the challenging and horrific conditions experienced by the soldiers of the First World War.

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Further Reading

Jeffery, Keith. *Ireland and The Great War*. Cambridge, 2011.

Hennessey, Thomas. *Dividing Ireland: World War I and Partition*. London, 1998.

Horne, John. *Our War: Ireland and The Great War*. Dublin, 2008.

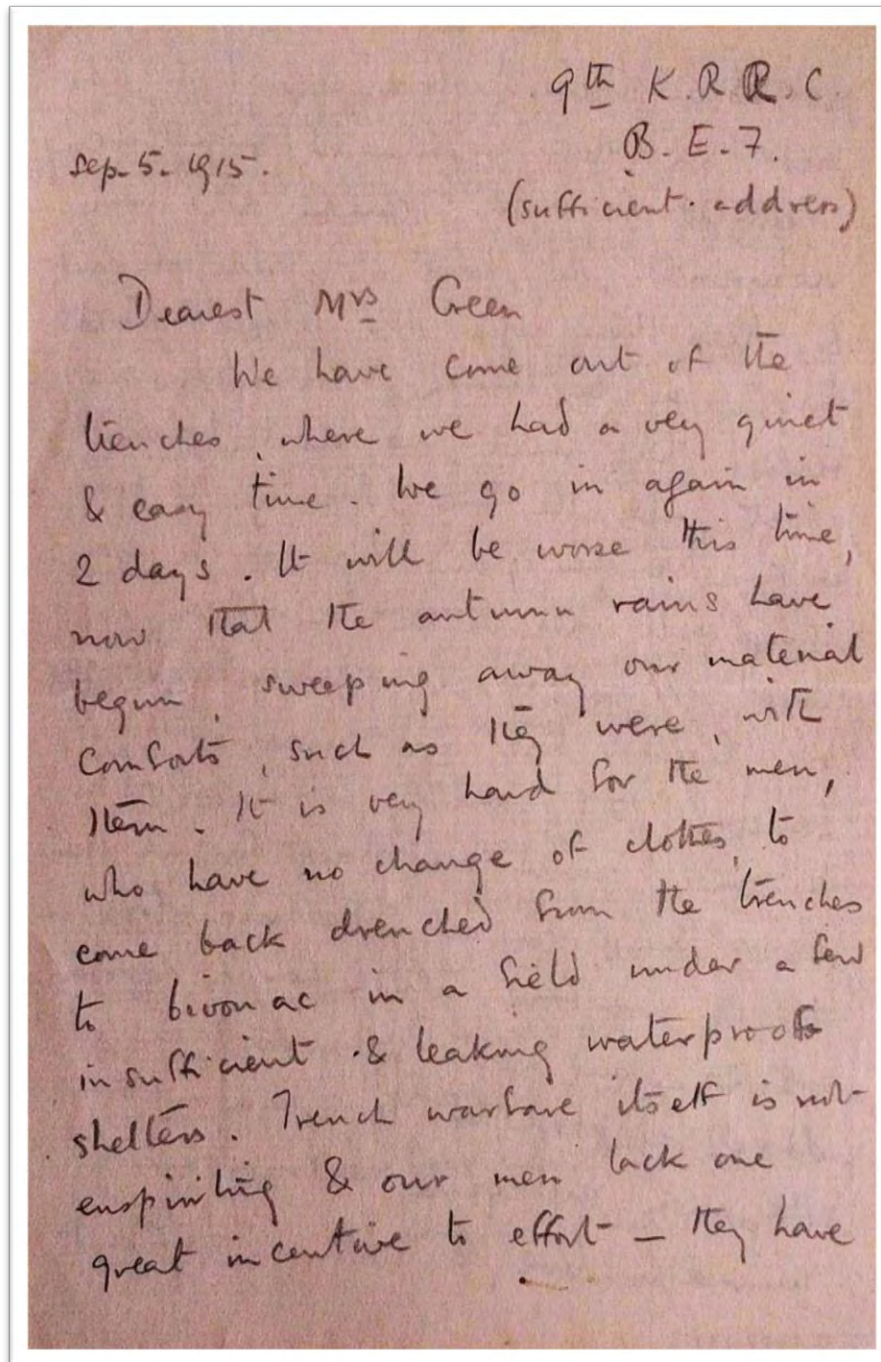
Horne, John and Madigan, Edward. *Towards Commemoration: Ireland in War and Revolution 1912-1923*. Dublin, 2013.

Letter from Robin Holloway to Alice Stopford Green

Taken from 'Twentyfive letters to Alice Stopford Green from the war front in France, 1915-1917, with copies of other letters on the war collected by her as material for lectures.'

Ms. 15, 120/1, National Library of Ireland.

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not been trained long enough to take pride in their regiment, & not being recruited from one county, like many regiments, they have no pride of county to keep them up. This tells discouragingly in the trenches. It makes one realize how much one must be on the spot, all the time, during the period in the trenches; and how much everything will depend on the officers in case of an attack, especially if gas or liquid fire are used. Still, I believe that possibly in an attack the men would come out for at their best, & it is only the monotony of trench warfare which has a depressing effect — and above all its lack of direct appeal to the imagination. The men are quite extraordinarily unimaginative, & that is difficult

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to understand. What is not immediately before their nose does not exist for them, & we do not always realize that.

It certainly requires a good deal of effort not to lose heart. It is odd to be living an existence where there is really nothing to look forward to, & where one is driven back entirely on the activity of the moment & on one's inner determination in the intervals of action.

The greatest comfort of all, I think, is the knowledge that the life one is fighting for is going on now uninterruptedly - Mathise working, as Georges writes to me, & Bertie writing, & Mrs Koehler designing a house. Some creative

work at any rate is still going on, by the side of this gigantic waste of energies.

All this is a poor answer to your extraordinarily encouraging letter. Still, I am sure you will not misunderstand it.

I was so delighted to have a letter from Mrs Koehler the other day, & several from Norman. Letters mean almost everything to us out here.

Yours affectionately
Robin Holway

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Transcription:

Sep. 5. 1915

9th K.R.R.C

B.E.7

(sufficient address)

Dearest Mrs. Green,

We have come out of the trenches where we had a very quiet & easy time. We go in again in 2 days. It will be worse this time, now that the autumn rains have begun, sweeping away our material comforts, such as it were, with them. It is very hard for the men, who have no change of clothes, to come back drenched from the trenches to [being?] in a field under a few insufficient & leaking waterproof shelters. Trench warfare itself is not inspiring & our men lack one great incentive to effort – they have not been trained long enough to take pride in their regiment & not being recruited from one county, like many regiments, they have no pride of county to keep them up. This tells distinctively in the trenches. It makes one realize how much one must be on the spot, all the time, during the period in the trenches; and how much everything will depend on the officers in case of an attack, especially if gas or liquid fire are used. Still I believe that possibly in an attack the men would [come out far as their best?], & it is only the monotony of trench warfare which has a depressing effect- and above all its lack of direct appeal to the imagination. The men are quite extraordinarily imaginative, & that is difficult to understand. What is not immediately before their nose does not exist for them, & we do not always realise that.

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Yours affectionately

Robin Holloway.