

**Glenbow Archives**

**M-6245-2a, Theodora Paynter McKay's First World War letters, 1916-1917**

Sister M. I Burns  
No. 5 General Hospital  
B.E.F  
France  
April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1916

Dear Paynter:

Your kind letter received yesterday forwarded from Malta, was so glad to have a few lines, we are so lonesome, somewhere in France.

Ailey and another Canadian Sister have just been over to see Johnnie and I and we went for a short walk between the drops of rain, it has rained continually here for a week and how it does rain down in torrents.

You will be surprised to hear I am in the same hospital with my Billy Campbell. When I said goodbye to him on the station platform at Wpeg I little dreamed that I would meet him a year later in the same hospital somewhere in France but wonders never cease. He had quite a bit of news to tell me and I have quite a lot of news to tell him. His year is up in June and he says he is going home to Canada and join the C.A.M.C. then come over again. Well I do not know which is best sometimes we long for our own people. We seem isolated, we are such a small party of Red Cross Nurses only 13 of us in France and we are scattered in twos around in different hospitals. I am glad I am with Johnnie. That is the one redeeming point.

So Josie MacDonald & Jess Smith turned it down. Well it is just as well to know what you are signing under. After all I think they are doing more good where they are. I guess Helen will not come now if she is in Vancouver. How is Margaret Howe getting along? I never hear from her, it is so hard to write to everybody.

Tomorrow is Easter Sunday and the war is still on, how everybody wishes it was an end or at least the end was in sight, I suppose recruiting is still going on in Canada and the hospital is full of soldiers. I know what the Eye & Ear Dept was like a year ago with all those ear, tonsil & eye cases.

Dear Paynter I am writing with lead pencil because there is no ink handy and my fountain pen is empty.

Who took your appendix out? I suppose Dr. Prowse removed your tonsils. Do you ever have a look in at the Eye & Ear Dept? How is Dr. Clare getting along? Who have you for house surgeons etc. etc. So many questions I would like to ask. I cannot place Mrs. Taylor of 1916. I guess there will be only a few girls that I will know there when I return. I am so afraid that you will all be getting married before I get back and then what would poor Burnsie do. I often think

of you all back in dear old Canada when I am crawling into my camp bed at night with a hot water bag to keep warm and I feel like shouting out as Sam McGee did, "Please shut that door it's the first time I have been warm".

Sunny France – well I think it has been all a dream. I have seen the sun once in a month.

Must close, my lead pencil has worn down & I have no knife to sharpen it. Excuse this scrawl, will do better next time.

Love to all.

Lovingly,  
Burnsie

[postcard of "Parish Church, Huddersfield, addressed to:]

Sister Painter  
No. 1 Canadian Gen. Hosp.  
Etaples, France

Jany 27<sup>th</sup> [1917] War Hosp. Huddlesfield

I arrived here on Thursday night. I am in a nice V.A.D. Hosp. Isn't this cold weather - we have not fires here but we get a hot water bottle to keep our feet warm. I hope you are still getting on fine and enjoying good health - Curtis is in Oxford.

Kind Regards  
A.W. Gregor [?]

[postcard of "The Town Enfield", postmarked June 12, 1917, and addressed to:]

Sister E.T. Paynter  
No. 1 Canadian Gen. Hospital  
Etaples, France

Suppose you have been wondering what has become of me am now at a Con-home very nice, near London. Guess you are frightfully busy again the result of the new offensive. Suppose you have a new set of HLD [?] men. Hoping this finds you in the best o f Health. Yours sincerely  
Forsy

October 4, 1917

Dear Sister

I am afraid that I haven't much time for writing just now, but I want to just scribble you a line to let you know that we have had an excellent show & it has all gone off very well indeed. Comparatively few casualties too, I am thankful to say. Poor old Strode was killed - I don't know whether you met him or not - he was a broad shouldered, uncouth being - but a very nice old thing - he was blown to bits by a 5.9. Only married 15 months ago and his wife had a daughter last month. You will remember Green who came over & had one of his feet blown off - poor chap. I got a tiny piece of shell in my back - I tried hard to get people to take an interest in it, but it was no good. It only just broke the skin & there was no sympathy going at all - only very pointed remarks about my being so fat that it couldn't get through!

We are living in a smelly dugout which is just crawling with flies - millions of them & all with the one idea that the only really nice place for a quiet respectable fly to settle on is the extreme tip of my nose. One way and another we have endured about as rapid a change from the pleasant surroundings where you are as one has any right to expect in a short time.

Alland went off to England quite happily - he said he was sorry to miss the show, but I expect that when he hears what it is like & has his wife & infant to console him that the sorrow will not be too pressing!

I had a letter from my small sister today - she said the last raid was rather nearer than she cared about - they appear to have dropped bombs quite close - but as the sentence about it was mixed up with a lengthy account of the last hockey match at school - it doesn't seem to have left any very lasting impression. The letter was enclosed in a pork pie - or rather in the same parcel as a pork pie. It arrived with the mail at 5 AM and the greater portion of the pork pie was very shortly afterwards enclosed in me! Pork pie & whiskey and soda at 5 AM is not exactly usual - but it appears to have done no permanent harm.

I am afraid that I have no more time for writing now but when we are less busy I will write again & let you know how we are progressing. I hope we shall get a chance to look you up on our way out & to have another dance. My address is Headquarters, 20<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade, B.E.F. The General is very well - but very tired - he sends his kind regards to you all & hopes you have not been bothered any more by the wretched bombs.

Please excuse dirt - it came off the roof - not off my hands.

Please write & let me have your news.

Yours very sincerely,

R. M. Burman

October 15, 1917

Dear Sister

Thank you so much for your letter. I was very glad to get it but sorry to hear that the wretched Bosh had been worrying you again – he is a despicable brute. We are living in quite a nice treatment camp some little way behind the line & enjoying ourselves as much as possible in this appalling weather – I really think that Belgium must have been the last country that God made & when he got to it He was running short of material so filled up the gaps with mud. Why anyone wants to fight for such an awful place beats me – I think we had better give it to Germany as a punishment.

The General got a tiny piece of shell in his neck and is now engaged in a violent argument with the Division as to whether he should be reported as wounded or not. There is a talk of our returning to your part of the country for a bit but I don't know whether it will come to anything. I am afraid not – three years out here has made me very distrustful of good news – it is only the bad which invariably comes true. That's a nice cynical remark to make in a letter I must say.

My brother turned up suddenly last night about 10 o'clock having heard of my whereabouts from a mutual friend. We had a great yarn together over some rum punch. We still hear periodically from Madame – every letter contains a new claim for something or other. I send her about half of what she asks & hope for the best. The Baron, however, is now adopting a new line and putting in a claim for four collapsible chairs which we left by mistake so that may keep her quiet for a bit.

Thank you very much I should like a curtain of the old rose & champagne stuff immensely. I will hand it in my dugout or hut and put on highly superior airs with other less fortunate occupants. It is most kind of you to suggest making it.

My horses are both going very strong but badly want exercise. If we have the luck to come your way I will bring them over for another canter.

Well I must close down as I have a good deal of work to do these days – but of a change isn't it?

I hope you will like the handkerchief I am putting in – it comes from a shop at Bailleul that I have been to for years.

Yours very sincerely

R.M. Burman

[Undated]

Dear Sister

This is just a line to tell you that we have come out of the line & are billeted at a place called PONT D'AQUIN near RENESCURE about 5 miles from LONGUENESSE. I will ride over tomorrow on the off chance of being able to see you & will try & do so in the morning in case you are able to come & have lunch at STOMER. Carlton will be come along too.

Yours ever

R. M. Burman

6<sup>th</sup> CR2 B.E.F. France  
6<sup>th</sup> December 1917

Dear Theo

Rec'd yours of the 30<sup>th</sup> today, just as I'm hanging around waiting for my movement over for blighty – Yes we sure had some excitement – from the 20<sup>th</sup> on – we went right thru into \_\_\_\_\_ (the point of the Salient) & slept there the night of the 22<sup>nd</sup>. We then moved into some Bosche dugouts about a mile back of the town as the town was too hot - & were there till the 30<sup>th</sup> when we had to “evacuate” – that is beat it like the devil without kits or anything else. We had 3 men killed – several wounded and about 3 missing presumably prisoners. On the morning of the 29<sup>th</sup> an order came in for our Co. to furnish a maintenance party for the back area - & 5 of us matched for who would bring them out. I was lucky enough to win so came out on the night of the 29<sup>th</sup> so missed the show. I've been mighty lucky all thru – missing things like this & hope it will continue for a few days more – I expect to be out by Sunday at the latest. This promises to be the biggest battle of the whole war right here and I understand both sides are massing heavily. They report that old man Hindenberg himself is here and hope his plan is to have something definite before Christmas so I guess there will be “hell a'poppin” here before long. He dropped quite a number of bombs here last night – 2 very close to our camp & broke all the windows in the huts & incidentally has shelled the trailheads here all day. Just interrupted by a machine over – bombing. Starting early tonight – only 5:15 so he has a good long night ahead of him & can make several trips over. I would sooner be shelled for a week than bombed for an hour. I believe – it just about gets my wind up all right – but what's the use. If you're hit – you're hit and that's all there is about it and if not you're lucky. Must ring off now & go to mess. Regards to Miss J and any other of the good Manitobans who you have there.

Best of luck old girl.

Sincerely  
Murray

[short note, postmarked December 22, 1917; perhaps really 1916?]

To wish you a safe voyage and every success, with a little remembrance of a very pleasant acquaintance at Hotel Frontenac and a hope that we will soon meet again.

Sisters Fogarty, Bliss Hearne, Little & Shaughnessy

[7<sup>th</sup> Division postcard, postmarked December 26, 1917]

Dear Sister

I am so sorry that I couldn't write before we left France but we had such a rush to get off. We are all very disappointed that we were not able to get over for another dance. Are any of you going on leave to London in the near future - If so - please let us know as Kelly and I both hope to go before very long & we could fix up a theatre or something. Very best wishes for the New Year.

Your sincerely R.M. Burman