

# THE MEN BEHIND THE GLASS

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John Davis (OC 49)

## LETTERS FROM THE FRONT

During the war, post between the front and home was the most common form of communication. The army handled 7,000 sacks of mail and 60,000 parcels daily and it took around four days to arrive. This meant, at the war's height, that 12 million letters a week were delivered to soldiers and a similar number sent back to parents, brothers, sisters, children and friends. This section examines the letters of six soldiers to examine what they wrote about to their friends and family back home. It takes letters from three former pupils of Campbell College, two men from West Belfast and a soldier from London serving in the London Scottish.

John Davis was a priest at Buittle in Scotland. He was aged 35 and married with three children when the war broke out. In 1916, Davis volunteered for military service. Having encouraged others to do so from his pulpit, he believed it was his duty to lead by example. Davis enlisted as a private in the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC) and in September 1916 was assigned to the RAMC River Sick Convoy Unit based in Mesopotamia (modern day Iraq). He wrote letters to his three children describing life on active service, ranging from daily observations and journeys to his role in the army. He died of heatstroke at Amara on 22nd July 1917.

*“Well children dear. Papa is sailing up and down the great river Tigris in a big boat taking poor soldiers who have fallen sick or have got wounded to be attended to in our big hospitals. I wonder, could you guess what time it is that Papa is writing this letter to you? Well, it is just half past one in the night-time and there are still another five long hours before he can go to bed for it’s funny that just now Papa goes to bed in the daytime just when other people are getting up and when they are in bed he is sitting up watching and listening; and every now and then he takes his lantern and walks around all three big boats and sees that all the poor soldiers are as comfortable as possible. Sometimes, he has to help them up in their blankets, sometimes get a hot water bottle for them, or a hot drink, or some medicine, or a lot of other little things and in between times, he perhaps get a few minutes to write a letter to Mama or Granny or you.”*

—  
Letter dated 29th December 1916.



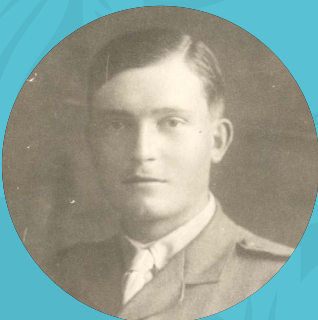
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**Dug out** – is slang term  
for a bunker in a trench



Robert Semple (OC 914)



William Semple (OC 913)

*“Sometimes when we are coming hard down the river we get a sudden bump against the bank when rounding the corner or bend of the river. One evening we were sitting at dinner - we dine in the evening - and I was sitting on box... and the man beside me on the milk box, when bump, we went against the bank and poor Papa and the other man suddenly disappeared below the table. Didn't the others just laugh at us - and what is that I hear - did I hear something like you and Syd and Dorothy laughing, you young rascals - laughing at your Papa - wouldn't I just give you a hiding if I were near you!! But sometimes I get the laugh as I did a few nights ago, when the surgeon was having a game with us and he suddenly disappeared below the table too”.*

—

Letter dated 2nd February 1917.

Robert and William Semple were brothers, aged 20 and 18, when war broke out in 1914. Both had been pupils at Campbell College. William served in the infantry as a Second Lieutenant in the 13th Battalion, King's Royal Rifle Corps, whilst Robert was an officer in the Royal Field Artillery, Guards Divisional Artillery. Two of seven children, Robert and William wrote to their sisters Mabel (13 years old in 1914) and Eileen (12 years old in 1914) from France and Belgium on the Western Front. Their letters described their daily lives and their jobs in the trenches and were often humorous. Both brothers were killed during the war; William was killed during a raid on German positions on 29th June 1916 and Robert died in hospital on 5th November 1918 of Spanish flu (he was in hospital after being wounded two weeks prior to this).

*“...in the trenches we live in a comfortable ‘dug out’ – that is a hole in the ground with a good room and a comfortable bed...out of the trenches we do nothing but dig new lines of trenches all day and sometimes at night. The weather is still very hot and far from pleasant for digging in.”*

—

William writing to Mabel and Eileen in early October 1915.



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### **Spanish Flu**

The Spanish Flu epidemic of 1918-19 is estimated to have infected 500 million to 1 billion people worldwide, with estimated deaths anywhere from 50 to 100 million people. In contrast, it is estimated that around 37 million people (civilians and military personnel) died over the course of the First World War. From an Irish perspective, over the four years of the war, just over 27,000 Irish were killed; in 1918-19 it is reported that just over 20,000 died from Spanish Flu. Unlike other strains of flu that are dangerous to children and old people, Spanish Flu was more common amongst young adults, making it particularly deadly to those fighting during the war. Many researchers have also suggested that the conditions created by the war aided in the spreading of the flu (massive troop movements, living in close quarters, overcrowded medical camps and hospitals, malnourishment and poor hygiene).

**Sub** – is short for sub-lieutenant, the lowest commissioned rank in the British Army.

*“...there are a lot of snipers round here. The other day I was laying a [telephone] wire down one of the trenches when I saw a soldier who was outside the wire get hit in the back. He sat down backwards and for a minute went on smoking his pipe as if nothing had happened. Suddenly he felt the pain. He dropped his pipe and let out a yell. Immediately three or four men jumped up to pull him to safety. Amongst them was the Sergeant Major. The minute the Sergeant Major got out of the trench he was shot through the heart”.*

—  
Robert writing to Mabel and Eileen about the danger of snipers.

*“Robert was a little sub/Had a tummy like a tub/But how he’s covered up with earth/So please restrain from ribald mirth”.*

—  
Robert joking with his sisters about what he’d like to have on his tombstone in November 1915.

*“I managed to shoot at least one German who I met out at night in front of the trenches. I now feel very blood-thirsty and you will have to take care how you behave when I get back if you tease me at all!”*

—  
William describing an experience from the trenches, 1916.

*“...plenty of things happen out here to prevent life becoming dull. The other day I was sitting in a shell hole with another officer admiring the view when all of a sudden an 8-inch shell burst in the shell hole just behind us. The exciting part of these big shells is that you can always hear them coming, and you always think they are going to land behind you”.*

—  
Robert writing to Mabel and Eileen in September 1916.



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William Moore

William Moore served as a Second Lieutenant in the 9th Battalion, Royal Irish Fusiliers, 36th (Ulster) Division. Whilst at Campbell College, William was a prefect and represented the school in the cricket XI in 1911 and the rugby first XV from 1909 to 1911. He wrote to his parents and wife, Mary, mostly about daily life in his division as well as on domestic and political events. William's time in the war lasted three months, from June 1917 to his death in action on 16th August 1917, during the Battle of Langemark.

1. *"I hope the situation will not get out of hand and perhaps the more moderate elements of the two great constitutional parties may draw together in face of the menace."*

—

William responding to political events back in Ireland,  
18th July 1917.

2. *"...it was a relief to get settled down in a fresh and open country-side. In fact, the country about here reminds me a great deal of the surroundings of Limavady, so it must be nice, as you can well imagine."*

—

One of William's comparisons between the French and Ulster countryside.

3. *'...By the way, would it be too much trouble to ask you to look for 2 little books which would be very useful to me out here? The names of the books are:*

- a. *'Maps and Map-reading', by Courtney Terrell, Inns of Court O.T.C. It is a long-shaped white paper-backed pamphlet (hardly a book).*
- b. *'French-English Technical Military Terms', by Marcus D. Humbert )?). It is a red paperbound volume with about 50 pages.*

*These two little books were brought home from Ards and I fancy they would be found either in the chest of drawers in the bedroom or outside in the lobby.*

—

William writing to his father requesting some books.





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**Hun** – was a derogatory term for the Germans named after a ancient tribe of nomadic warriors with a reputation for barbarism.

4. *‘...with regard to the late advances, nearly everybody says it would have been an overwhelming success, if the terribly wet weather had not interfered with the progress of the operations. As it was, we did as well as could be expected and the Hun has again proved himself to be inferior to our men in every respect. As you probably know, the area of the British push was for a long time the most uncomfortable part of the line, so it behoves us to get rid of the Hun in this district, and we mean to do so.’*

—

William commenting on recent setbacks in his penultimate letter home on 12th August 1917.

5. *‘...the Ulster Division will shortly be in action again, and that we all hope that there will be a successful upshot to our “little bit” of the attack’.*

—

William writing to his father. This would be his final letter home before his death.



An image from the Battle of Langemark where William Moore was killed.



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James McKenna, serving as a Corporal in the 6th Connaught Rangers, wrote a series of postcards to his wife Mary in Gibson Street, West Belfast. James survived the war and died in 1954. Many of these postcards are undated.

1. *'[undated] Dear Wife, Got the limes [fruit]...Hoping all is well with the Children. I am in the best of health. I could not say what the limes are for...'*

—

Replying to his wife after receiving some limes for an unknown reason.

2. *'[undated] I hope to hear from you soon. I thought you would have answered my letters...I was out last Tuesday of Hospital. Well things are hot at present here and I am expecting a big battle to come off soon...If you can would like a Thompson weekly [a local newspaper]. Your loving husband, Jim.'*

—

Replying to his wife complaining she had not written.

3. *'[undated] Write and let me know if you receive these PCs [post cards] and also the parcel. I hope to send John this silver watch soon...'*

—

Writing for reassurance that his wife is getting the items he is sending through the post.

4. *'20 January 1916... I have got more cigs, chocolate and tobacco also Christmas puddings this while back that my belly is sore eating...'*

5. *'[Undated] Dear Wife, [I] received your kind and ever welcome letter, glad to see you and the children are keeping well. I will write a letter later on as I am busy at present. Jim.'*



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6. '26 June 1916, France. Dear Wife, Just a few lines hoping to find you and the children in good health as it leaves me in the best at present. I hope you enjoyed Easter holidays. We had good weather and a good time. But the Germans kept shelling us especially on Easter Sunday, the big shell dropped close to the chapel but did not strike it.'

—  
Telling his wife about his health and what he did during Easter, the Easter Rising was taking place in Dublin at the same time.

7. '8th July 1916, Dear Wife, I was expecting a letter from you also the paper. I was waiting as to answer them. I am sending the badge [his cap badge] so you can look out for it. I hope it will not be broke by the time it reaches you. Jim'.

Sergeant James Conlon, joined in the 6th Connaught Rangers and later transferred to the Royal Irish Rifles. He saw action at Gallipoli where he was wounded. He survived the war and wrote to his mother on 19 May 1917.

*Dear Mother, In answer to your ever welcome letter which I received all night I am pleased to know you are all well at home as this letter leaves me at present....I read the cutting from the paper [about him being wounded that his mother had sent] I did laugh when I got to know I had been wounded and admitted to hospital...You will excuse me for not answering your letter more soon but we have been very busy for the last four days and it is only now I am getting to time to write. I hope you are going on all right with your allotment. Tell Mimmie I want to know what she is going to grow and if the spuds are going to brown boiled ready to eat...'*





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A.H. Hubbard wrote letters to his friends, mother and sisters while a private in No.11 Platoon, 'C' Company, 1/14th (County of London) Battalion (London Scottish), London Regiment (168th Brigade, 56th (London) Division). He was from London but served in a unit which had strong links to Scotland. He survived the war but committed suicide shortly afterwards with shell shock cited as a contributing factor for his death.

*1. '4 May 1916, Dear Mum and Dad...The food...everyone is grumbling it is alright before it is cooked but rotten after and not sufficient by a long way...'*

*2. '9 June 1916, Dear Parents...Heaps of mud and lice including rats of course...I am very pleased to tell you I have been picked out of our platoon to carry on as officers servant for a time and when we have finished our rest shall spend best part of the next period in the trenches in a dugout cooking etc., shall be very well supplied with cigarettes and good food...and don't want you to go to any more expense with sending parcels until I ask you for a few things...'*

*3. '13 June 1916 Dear Fred [his friend]... I am not looking forward to it [returning to the front] I can assure you it is a proper hell of a night time, one cannot imagine unless one was here to witness it...I shall be glad when the orders comes through for us to cease fire and we can pack up and return for good....my mind seems to get full of thoughts at times when the Sundays come round especially. I can picture you all sitting around the table about 8.30 enjoying a good breakfast and me miles away in this miserable place which is blow to bits by the Huns...'*



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4. '29 June 1916, Dear Nellie [sister]...I should be in my glory if the news came through to cease fire and pack up...I imagine how everything looks at home and the garden...what a treat it will be feel nice and clean, at present it is up to your neck in mud, which all helps to feel miserable. I am sorry to have to state all this but I don't feel inclined to tell you a pack of lies if the truth was told a bit more often, I don't suppose the war would be on now, when you land over here, they have got you tight and treat you as they think...

5. '7 July 1916. Dear Parents...[written after an attack on 1st July 1916] we had strict orders not to take prisoners, no matter if wounded...I empty my magazine into 3 Germans that came out of one of their deep dugouts bleeding badly and put them out of their misery, they had no feeling whatever for us poor chaps...'



An Irish soldier in the trenches at Gallipoli. Image courtesy of IWM.



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## QUESTIONS

- ① What would motivate soldiers to write to their relatives?
- ② What motivated parents, sisters, brothers, friends and other people to write to soldiers in the trenches?
- ③ What subjects did soldiers write to their relatives about?
- ④ What items do soldiers receive from home, why would they request and need these items?
- ⑤ How does the audience to whom the soldier is writing affect their tone and language?

### Extension

Study the themes and topics that men discussed in their letters home and who these letters were written to. Think about the reasons why they chose to write about certain events or topics and explain what you think dictated the content of their letters.

### Group Discussion Task

At this stage in history, communication via letter writing was the only way soldiers on the front line could communicate with their loved ones. Think about the many forms of communication available to you today. List as many as you can think of and identify if these are private methods (one to one) or public (one to many).

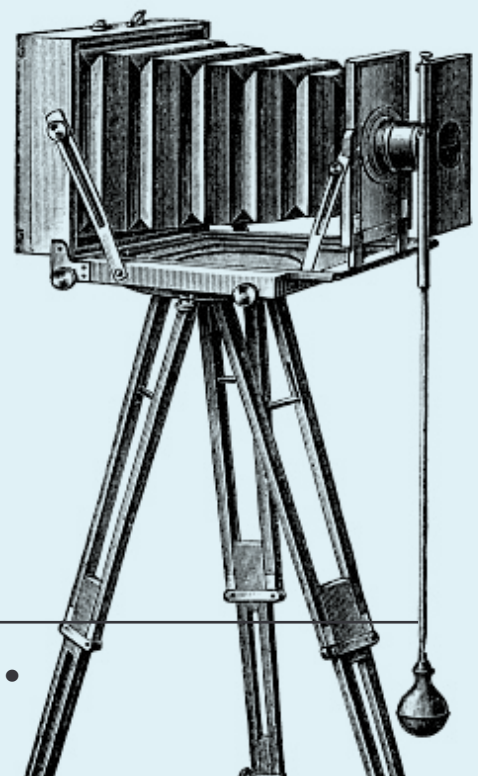
What are the advantages and disadvantages that modern communication holds over communication at the time of the First World War?

### Digital Task

*This can be completed as a group/paired activity or an individual activity.*

Using a mobile device and video editing software, create a video diary for a family member from the front line.

Plan, script and storyboard your video to include any other elements that you think may make it interesting or more informative (video clips, images, audio, on-screen text, etc...). On completion of your video, evaluate its design and effectiveness. Is there anything that you would do differently the next time? Look at videos created by classmates and offer constructive praise and feedback.





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