

Black Country-born Canadian

LAST month we printed extracts from the letters of Pte Enoch Dingley of the King's Royal Rifle Corps, a Black Country lad who fought and died for his country during the First World War. While we were preparing that article we were contacted by Aleksandra Bennett, Associate Professor of History at Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada, with details of a similar story.

Originally from Gloucester, she has edited a new book, the collected wartime letters of Pte George Timmins of the 18th Battalion Canadian Expeditionary Force, who fought at Vimy, Lens, Passchendaele and Amiens. George was a Black Country lad too, being born and raised in Old Hill before he emigrated to Canada in 1905. Aleksandra has allowed us to reprint extracts from George's letters; not only do they detail the experiences of a Black Countryman at war but George was also able to revisit his homeland (his only leave during 22 months in the trenches was spent in Old Hill) and his letters give us a brief snapshot of the Black Country in wartime.

George Timmins was born in Old Hill in 1883, the son of **Felix Timmins** and **Anne Holloway**. Anne's father had been a gamekeeper for **Lord Lyttelton** at Hagley Hall while Felix was born in Rowley Regis in around 1847.

When he was only 15 George left the Black Country in order to find work. He went to York and then on to Middlesbrough, where he worked in a tube works making fittings. In 1902, still a teenager, he went to Canada with two friends where he worked in the Iron Mask mine in Kamloops, British Columbia. His stay in Canada was brief and George returned home, where he became a chainmaker. On 1st March, 1905, George married **May Dunn** at Holy Trinity Church, Old Hill. May had also been born in 1883, in Cradley Heath, the daughter of **Esau Dunn**, a chainmaker. On their wedding certificate George's

occupation is listed as a striker.

Just one week after they were married George and May Timmins set sail for Canada, hoping to find a better life. As George was to write in his old age, "There was always too great a division between the different grades, the classes and the masses. That's the reason I came over here. I didn't like the touching of hats to the minister, etc." George and May settled in Oshawa, Ontario, where George found work at the Malleable Iron Works, making chain, and later at the Steel Range Company. They began a family; **Winnifred Mary (Winnie)** was born in 1906, **Walter James (Jim)** in 1907 and **Margaret Ann (Mollie)** in 1914.

War

By the time the First World War broke out George was working as a clerk. The early years of the war saw thousands of Canadian men flock to the colours in defence of the motherland. George thought long and hard about whether or not he should enlist and leave his wife and young children behind. George and May discussed it at length before George enlisted in March 1916; he had waited until Mollie was old enough to walk and be less of a burden for his wife.

George sailed with his battalion on 23rd July, 1916, from Halifax, Nova Scotia, aboard the White Star Line's RMS Olympic, sister ship to Titanic and Britannic. Olympic did not suffer the same ill fortune as her sister ships. Titanic famously sank on its maiden voyage across the Atlantic in 1912, while Britannic, converted to a hospital ship, struck a mine and sank off the coast of Greece in 1916. Olympic still had its share of accidents, most famously in 1911 when she collided with the warship HMS Hawke off the Isle of Wight. Holed and with two compartments flooded Olympic limped back to port. Repaired she became a very successful troop transport, carrying up to 201,000 troops and earning the



Pte George Timmins, the photograph he gave in a locket to his daughters.

nickname 'Old Reliable'. On 12th May, 1918, Olympic rammed and sank U-103, a German submarine, the only recorded instance in the First World War where a merchant vessel sank an enemy warship. Following the war Olympic returned to passenger service until decommissioned in 1935.

George arrived in Liverpool on 31st July, 1916, and travelled by train to the Canadian camp in Hampshire, "about seven hours from the trenches", as he put it. On his journey he had passed through his homeland and in a letter dated 1st August, 1916, he described what he saw from the train:

Train

"We came through England in the train. It looks good too at this season. We passed through the Black Country. Wolverhampton, Bilston, Smethwick, West Bromwich, Handsworth, Birmingham. The Black Country is rightly named. It doesn't compare with the rest of the country very favourably. That's from the train of course. **But it was like a glimpse of home to me and I was stuck half way out of the window all the**

way. Well there's one thing about it, the people of the Black Country gave us the best reception passing through of any. Women and children lined the back fences and railroad banks and pit banks. Women with Union Jacks and the inevitable grimy baby. But the hundreds of school kids on the fences warmed my heart. Nice white 'pinner' on the little girls and collars on the little boys. There must have been thousands. My God, talk about kids. I said hundreds before but on considering I'm sure there was thousands. I mention this so that you won't say 'exaggerating as usual'. I am going up as soon as I get a pass. **I am going to have a pint with your old man if he is still drinking."**

No letters survive to tell us if George ever made good on his promise to have a drink with his father-in-law. He was soon in France and was quick to discover the realities of life in the trenches. His letter of 23rd November, 1916, describes the infamous mud:

"It's been wet this last week and the mud is over our knees, in fact up to our thighs in places. I used to think the mud tales were exaggerated, but now I see it's as true as the scripture. Us gang only go out nights to hold the advanced posts and believe me it's some job getting there in the dark. It sounds impossible for men to travel with sticky mud to their thighs with rubber boots right to the top of their legs and strapped on, but we do it every time we go out on duty."

There were official reports of the men's clothes and equipment being so coated in mud that they weighed over 120lbs. Rubber waders were issued in late 1915 but

they were cold, treacherous on duck boards, and did not allow the feet to breathe, making the soldiers more prone to trench foot.

In his letters to his wife and children George described the conditions for the Canadian troops in the trenches. George was involved in some of the fiercest fighting of the war, facing near constant bombardment as the battle lines moved back and forth over the same stretch of territory. One letter describes George's position following a short advance:

"**12th May, 1917.** We have been holding the line for four days and now are back about a mile for four more. Say those days in the line if often repeated will put us all in the mad house. It's the place we drove the Germans back and we had to dig ourselves in, in a big plain like a huge meadow. You see the French farmer never fences his land. Well you can understand that our defences were almost nothing. We had to crouch in little 'funk' holes dug in the side of the trench and take all his shell fire without a kick except of course from our own artillery. We were there in case he came over to recapture what we held. A big 5'9 would come over and bury somebody, sometimes as in one case it did, buried four. They came so near they would shake every bone in your body. We sure lost a lot of good men, but I'm here yet, thank God. When we first moved in there was some mix-up in the place and we had to change. I was good and mad as I considered I had a good spot. Well the poor guy that got that particular spot, one of my own section too, was killed the last afternoon in. Poor fellow, he was unlucky. Just joined the Batt on Jan 17th, the same day as **Jack Burr** came out of hospital and rejoined, two days before we came in and killed on his first trip. We are now living in little holes dug in a bank on the side of a sunken road, each man has his own little home, just room to lay down in case of shell fire covering the road. You'd laugh if you could see us.

"All winter we lived with the rats and now we are sharing with the fishworms and beetles of which there are thousands. But I guess we are giving the Germans all they want. Their shell fire was awful to stand, but ours must be ten times worse for them. Say when our barrage opens up the air is so full of shells, you'd wonder how they get past each other without colliding, and the miracle of it is when there's a little lull you will hear a skylark singing up there amongst it. You'd wonder how he ever got through. I sure admire the

skylark from now on."

George fought through the grim hell of Passchendaele and on being taken out of the line he was rewarded with a leave pass back to England. **George spent his leave at his mother's home at 170 Haden Cross, Old Hill, but the terrible conditions of the Flanders battlefield had taken their toll, as George made clear in a letter to his wife:**

Blighty

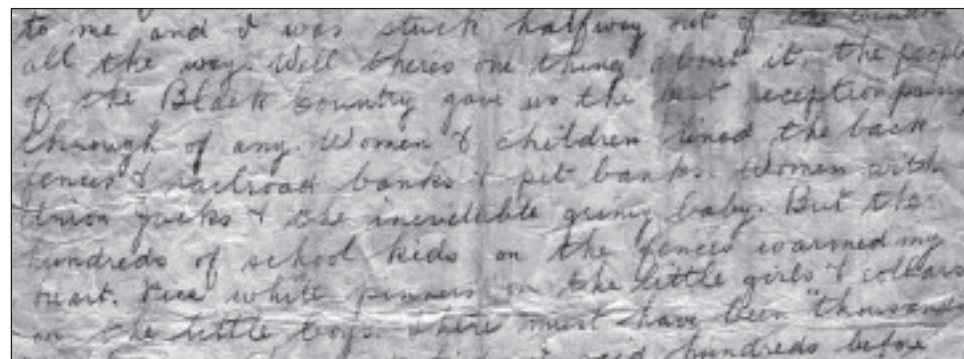
"**24th November, 1917.** I spent my first night in Blighty at Mary's at Small Heath being treated like a prince. I came on home the next day. I am having an awful time. After leaving Belgium my feet went bad and I intended to report sick as soon as we stayed some place but as soon as we reached our destination a whole lot of passes came through, as a reward for our hardships I imagine, as they never came so fast before. Well I got mine and determined to say nothing about my feet or gas sores till I had had my leave as they might stop it. I thought maybe that to sit by the fire-side in the dry and warm would cure me right away. I think it's the opposite. I'm here on leave and am suffering agonies. Can just get my boots about 1/4 time. I wear them till the pain is unbearable and then take them off. Immediately after my feet swell up so that I can't get them on again. It's either trench feet or chronic rheumatism. I'm going to try two more days and if they are no better I'm going to report sick. Though I hate to do it as the men will think I'm swinging the lead, but it's sure I'm no good on active service in this condition. Will let you know anyway."

Pain

George had trench foot, a prevalent condition among the troops who spent hours with their feet immersed in water, unable to dry them or change their socks. In all 74,711 British troops were hospitalised in France with trench foot or frostbite. The severe pain George suffered was actually a sign that his feet were recovering. The gas sores he refers to may have been caused by mustard gas, designed to attack the moist parts of the body, the eyes, armpits and crotch, raising excruciatingly painful blisters.

George's next letter home relates how he is still suffering but also his pleasure at seeing his family again. It also gives details of the shortages faced by people in Britain at that time.

"**25th November, 1917.** I'm still here and missing you more every second. My feet are still on the blink and the pain is something awful. ☹️



One of George's letters telling how he saw the Black Country once again from a passing train.

infantryman of the Great War

(Continued from previous page)

Gee, how I miss your old sympathy although I know you would laugh at my antics afterwards. You should see me trying to walk. Say it's a comedy to the onlookers probably but by heavens it's a tragedy to me. I am thinking of reporting to a military hospital tomorrow. If they send me back to France in this condition I don't know what I'll do as immediately my feet get a little cool they pain so much worse so you'll understand what that will mean in France.

"Say you ought to see Mary's baby. He is a great big boy and so good. Just sits where she puts him and laughs and laughs. Thinks I'm all right, evidently, as he climbed all over me chuckling to himself. I haven't seen Edith or Florrie yet and Sarah and Dad only once. You will understand I'm almost confined to the house completely as I can hardly wear my boots at all. **Things look bad here. You should see the women lined up about a block to buy 1/2 pound of margarine or tea. The pubs only open once in a while as their supply is curtailed. Then they'll only sell to their steadies. I tried six places in Cradley Heath two days ago before I could get a drink. Then I had an old chainmaker, whose instinct was unerring, to guide me.**"

Birthday

George celebrated his 35th birthday while on leave. He wrote a touching letter to his wife as well as sending presents for Christmas.

"**30th November, 1917.** My birthday and in England. If I was at home I would hear you saying the old, old stuff. Many Happy Returns. Just imagine, sweetheart, it's sure worth writing in words (thirty five, there), won't I soon be old, eh? Funny though, I'm as much a kid in

spirits as I was 20 years ago, it seems to me. When I look at your girls and ours and think of their ages it seems so funny. I always think of you as the young looking pretty mother you were 12 years ago. And also two years ago. I know you haven't altered much in spite of what you sometimes say in your letters. Great Scott. I always dream of you just as you are, I know. Still longing sweetheart to have you again, believe me. I am sending a parcel of presents for you for Christmas. A brooch for you, hope you'll like it. A locket each for Mollie and Win. I have put a photo of myself in each. If you want to remove them or change them, the top removes by unscrewing. There's a knife for Jim. The only one of the kind in town now as the man said he couldn't get any more. There seems to be lots of things they can't get. See a row of women waiting to get 1/4lb marg, no butter to be had and often no tea or sugar. Still they say we are winning."

His leave came to an end and with a heavy heart George returned to France and life in the trenches. In his letter home George again described the conditions of those living in the Black Country.

"**3rd December, 1917.** I'm going back to France today. Not with so much enthusiasm as I went before I assure you. This thing looks like lasting for ever. You should see the women shopping over here. Standing in a line up for maybe two hours on the chance of getting 1/4 lb margarine and finally getting there to be told it's all sold. The same with tea, sugar, bacon, eggs, etc., etc. Talk about starving Germany. She's sure doing it to England. But I never saw so much money here in my life. Thousands or girls working

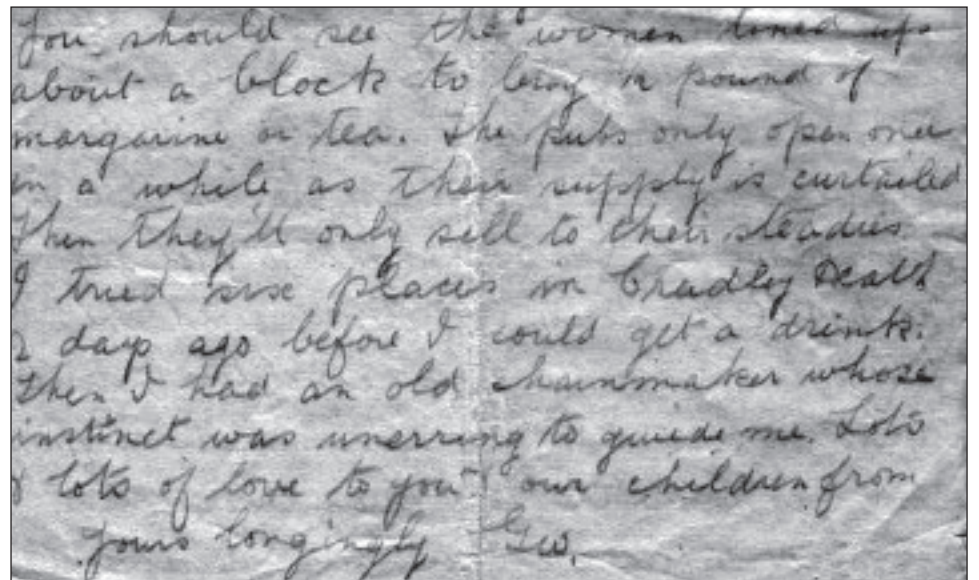
in every place. Some girls 16 make four pounds a week and everything in proportion. I guess the manufacturers are satisfied to go on with the war, they're making all kinds of money."

Unlike the Second World War there was no rationing in the First World War. Prices soared as food became scarce and many families faced starvation. Those that had money could afford to pay the high prices and there were many that did well during the war. In another letter George writes of munitions workers earning £1 a day or more and "little girls making three of four quid a week and dressing like the proverbial actress." This caused much bitterness amongst the troops at the front, who faced death in the muddy trenches while their wives and children struggled on poor army wages.

George had written "this thing looks like lasting for ever" and 1918 saw some of the fiercest fighting of the war. March and April saw the Germans' last great offensive on the Western Front as they aimed a knock out blow to defeat the Allies. They advanced many miles and it was only desperate rearguard actions by the British and Empire forces that prevented a collapse.

Fighting

George was again in the thick of the fighting. With the German advance halted the Allies launched a massive counter-offensive. This was the action known as the 'Advance to Victory'. The German army was now a broken force in the field, its fighting moral in tatters. Officers and men surrendered in droves as the Allies began to roll the German front lines back towards their own frontier. It was now only a matter of time before Germany surrendered. However, it was at



Another letter telling how wartime shortages made a drink hard to find in Cradley Heath.

this time that George Timmins was wounded. He had lived through some of the worst of the war but now, as the Allies neared victory, he was shot in the hip and right forearm on 8th August, 1918, the first day of the Battle of Amiens. That day saw the Canadians advance nearly 10km, taking 12 French villages and capturing 5,033 prisoners of war and 161 guns. George's wounds were serious enough for him to be sent to a hospital in London and from there he wrote to his wife. His letter illustrates the mixed feelings common to a soldier. While he was glad to be safe, many miles from the fighting, he also wanted to be back among his colleagues and savouring the taste of victory:

"**31st August, 1918.** I thought I would be able to get up and hobble round the ward, but nay! The wound hadn't healed good enough so it was decreed that I remain in bed. Guess it's a week more in bed at least. Never mind, it's another week of the war gone. I see in the papers that we are still pushing ahead and the Canucks are doing fine work. Such is the peculiar make-up of man that, often as I have wished myself out of it and knowing as I do, none better, the horrors of it, I almost find myself wishing I was into it again. It's so good to feel you are in and winning. Advancing all the time. It's so different to fighting on the defensive like we were in March and April. That's what gets your goat. Anyway, kiddie, I suppose I should be thankful to be lying here in a good warm bed with lots to eat, instead of being suffering what I know the boys are suffering out there. It's adding to my chances of eventually getting home again and seeing you all. I often imagine what it will be like to have you all round me again. Sometimes squabbling, eh? I'll guarantee to be good natured and every other old thing that goes to make a model husband."

In the same letter George gives details of the day he

was wounded. The passage illustrates the desperate condition of the German army at that time as thousands of soldiers surrendered or deserted en masse:

"I brought out five perfectly healthy, unwounded Germans for about six miles. Me being wounded and almost crippled. I made two of them help me along in turns, tho the truth is they didn't want much making. They seemed glad to get away at any price. They half carried me through the grain fields. Their only anxiety was to make it faster. Honest one almost feels sorry for them, or else contemptuous, for their eagerness to please."

George was lucky that he never had to return to the fighting. After treatment at the 4th London General Hospital, Denmark Hill, George convalesced at Woodcote Park, Epsom. He was discharged on Armistice Day and on 28th December, 1918, he was transferred to the 4th Canadian Reserve Battalion. On 9th January, 1919, he was stationed at Kinmel Park Camp, Rhyll, prior to his return to Canada. He sailed on 18th January, aboard Cunard's RMS Aquitania, landing at Halifax on 24th January, 1919. George returned to his family in Oshawa. His wife passed away in 1955, shortly after celebrating their

golden wedding anniversary, and George Timmins died in 1974.

Book

George's 67 surviving letters are collected in '**Kiss the Kids for Dad, Don't Forget to Write: the War-time Letters of George Timmins, 1916-18**' edited by **Y.A. Bennett** and published in Canada by UBC Press. The book is rather expensive, priced in hardback at \$85 Canadian. We are unaware of a UK distributor for the book but, at the time of writing, it can be purchased online at www.amazon.co.uk at £76.50, at www.eurospanbookstore.com at £76.50, or at www.waterstones.com at £65.03.

A paperback edition will be published in Canada later in the year but we have no details of this, but when these are available we will publish them.

(Our sincere thanks to Aleksandra Bennett for supplying the information used in this article. If there are any descendants of George and May's families still living in or around the Black Country, we would be delighted to hear from you. Please let us know, and we'll put you in touch with Aleksandra).



Canadian troops in the mud of Passchendaele. George Timmins suffered trench foot as a result.

Bugle Sudoku

Fill in the blanks so that each row, each column and each smaller 3 by 3 block contains all the numbers from 1 to 9. Solution on page 23.

	8		2	3				
5		4						7
	9		3		6			
				8				7
2			2					1
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