

Douglas Constable's letter to his former Head Teacher John Hamilton of St Mary's Melrose (circa. 1914)

Transcript

I am writing this in my dug out, a very comfortable little hole, but overrun with mice. Rats, fortunately, cannot get through the mesh of the wire-netting with which the walls are lined, so they must needs squeak and squeal in the outer darkness. We came into the trenches again last night, and have had since then the quietest twenty-four hours I have yet experienced while actually in them. The Huns are evidently devoting all their energy to attacks on the French further along the line. This is pleasant, and as it should be, for when I came out I was told this particular sector was generally as quiet as any. We have held it while it was unquiet, and now trust it is returning to its normal state. It seems we are likely to be removed soon to another, and, by repute, most abominable sector, where the country is desolate, the people all fled, the trenches wretched, and the enemy ever active.

The trenches here were a revelation to me and would be to any one who had thought that trenches, so called, bore any resemblance to the ditch-like affairs men dig for practice at home. I will try to give you some idea of them. First of all, you have in front, between you and the Germans, an enormous rampart of sandbags and earth, measuring something like twelve feet high, and nearly as many feet thick, except that it naturally slopes inwards a bit, and is therefore thinner at the top. Behind this tremendous barrier – which itself is again protected by a moat, barbed-wire entanglements, &c. – you have two, three, or possibly more parallel alleys (or trenches if you like, but they are all about the level of the ground), divided each from each by thick walls of sandbags, and are laid with wooden railways, so that one never puts foot on the ground.

The first of these, of course, is the fire trench: the others are for communication purposes. Put together, they form, as it were, the veins, and then surrounding them you have a sort of modern catacomb, the elaboration and complexity of the details of which are almost beyond description, and very wonderful when one remembers that the whole have been created out of the level fields, under the constant fire of the vigilant enemy. You must imagine a sort of conglomeration of dugouts – or “dugs-out,” as a pedantic fellow-officer insists on saying – store rooms, drains, and ditches, and bridges to cross them, trees and telephones, wells and pools, Clapham Junctions of converging and intersecting trenches, and what not, and here and there is a grave, evidently dug just anywhere to provide a sobering reminder of what it all means.

The inscriptions on the rough little crosses above these graves are sometimes pathetic enough one sees something like this: - "Erected by such and such a regiment in loving memory (this phrase is invariable) of an unknown British soldier, " followed by the date when they found him, and gave him decent burial. It is not probable we shall find such elaborate "works" as these in the next sector allotted to us.

This is as uninteresting and unattractive a piece of country as I have ever seen, and the people who cling to their now desolate homes, in a most remarkable manner, are peculiarly dull, hard, and "dour" – quite un-French in their ways, and their sentiments too, I sometimes think. The other day while we were drilling in a field at our rest town a sinister, slimy-looking man sidled up to me, and asked if these "soldats" were mine – just as if they were tin ones that you might take out of a box to play with! Being desirous to impress him with my importance, I said they were mine, whereupon he promptly demanded payment in compensation for the damage done to his field by what he termed their "exercises." A heated argument, on his part only, ensued: and he got nothing out of me. I heard the other day of a farmer who said with great frankness that to him it was a matter of entire indifference who won the war, and, he added, if there was to be a foreign occupation, he preferred the Germans, who had made

themselves less obnoxious when they held these parts before the battle of Aisne than the English had done since!

A fellow-officer said to me with great truth, I thought, that this country – the cockpit of Europe, as somebody called it – thrives on war, and has done so through the centuries. So long as there are great armies to be fed at exorbitant rates it does not care who achieves the Hegemony of Europe!

I think, knowing me as you do, you would find it difficult to "see" me in my present circumstances. I am seated in my little dug-out, or rather I am recumbent on the bed – formed of a few planks – as I have no room for a chair, and am writing by the light of a single candle. I have a good stove, which is burning merrily, but does not provide much heat unless one squats close to it, as the place is so draughty. I am, of course, full dressed with all my killing equipment on, even to my revolver, and have been so since we came in. One has to sleep with everything on. I have my legs buried in a couple of empty sandbags, partly to keep them warm – we have frost for the first time since I came out – and partly to keep the mud of my boots off my rug. All the other necessaries of existence out here, such as an electric torch, a cake or two of chocolate, something to read, &c. are on a small shelf close at hand.

Outside it is fairly quiet except for the rather lurid conversation of the men and the occasional crack of a bullet against the sandbags. These are persistent, but comparatively innocuous, though we had one casualty from a stray bullet yesterday. It is pitch dark, but every couple of minutes or so the whole place is lit up like day by the flares sent up by both sides. One can see these flares many miles away in such level country. Their light has a curiously hard effect like very bright motor lamps, and I often think if one could get on a small hill close to the lines and commanding a view of them for miles one would see a weird sight at night with these things shooting up everywhere.

I have just had a birthday, and it is curious to reflect that up till a month or so ago I had never been in immediate personal danger, so far as I know, and never looked on Death: while now if I am not living in immediate personal danger I have at least the possibility of it continually before me, as I have been twice face to face with death myself, and seen it come to others in a very dreadful form. My very first day in the trenches was the worst so far as sights are concerned. I saw and heard things that day which I shall not forget, and which opened my eyes once for all to what war means. But the worst day I have passed so far in the sense of strain on the nerves was one about a week ago in a fort where we were heavily bombarded, and one waited for hours watching the shells drawing steadily nearer and nearer. However, I am glad to say that whether I am cut out for a soldier or not, I am so constituted as not be greatly affected by these things, and I trust this letter will bear witness that I am cheerful and none the worse of my "experiences". D.O.C.
(Douglas Oliphant Constable)