

The Operation Canada Digital War Diaries Project

By Dr. Irene Gammel



"Nerves start going bad," Clarence (Buster) Booth recorded in his personal diary on April 26, 1916. Four days later: "This place is a sure Hell," referring to Scottish Wood near Dickebusch in Flanders, where the 24th Battalion faced heavy shelling that killed four (including two buglers) and wounded eight. Considering his role as a drummer, Booth would have been particularly close to the buglers. Just one month later, on June 2, 1916, Booth noted his diagnosis from the hospital: "Shell shock." In total Booth, who served as a drummer, confided three episodes of "shell shock" to his personal diary before being removed from frontline duty for the remainder of the war, reassigned as a batman and cook in the 2nd Divisional General Headquarters. Booth wrote the bulk of his entries in 1916 in a single 388-page brown leather-bound diary, the front cover embossed with the words "A SOLDIER'S DIARY" and an outline of the general service badge of the CEF (**Figure 1**). The inside of the front cover contains Booth's personal identification information (**Figure 2**), and the diary contains some additional visual elements, including pressed leaves and flowers and drawings by Booth, underscoring human vulnerability.

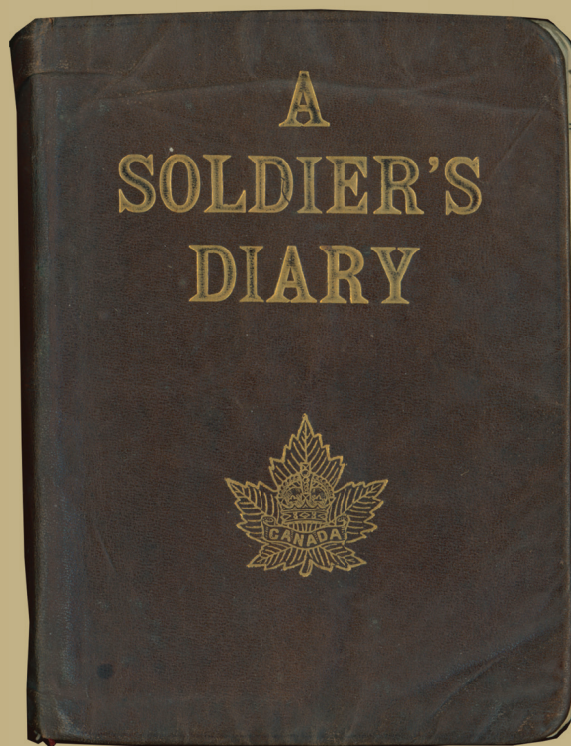


Figure 1: Clarence Booth, Cover, *Diary of Clarence Booth, 1915-1916*, Digital Frame 1, The Operation Canada Digital War Diaries Project, MLC Research Centre, Toronto. Courtesy of Canadian Centre for the Great War (Centre canadien pour la Grande Guerre), Montreal.

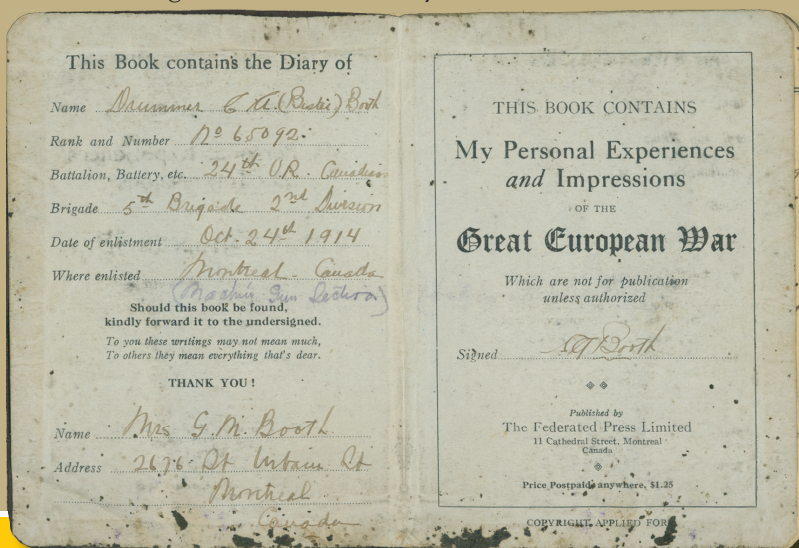


Figure 2: Clarence Booth, Endpapers following front cover, *Diary of Clarence Booth, 1915-1916*, Digital Frame 2, The Operation Canada Digital War Diaries Project, MLC Research Centre, Toronto. Courtesy of Canadian Centre for the Great War (Centre canadien pour la Grande Guerre), Montreal.

Operation Canada

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Diaries Terminology Research Volunteer Contributors



Welcome to the Operation Canada Digital War Diaries Project, which explores the diaries of the First World War through the lenses of gender, race, and culture. We hope you enjoy the adventure of exploring the many thousands of pages written by Canadians overseas and at home during times of stress more than a century ago.

Booth's shell-shock diary is part of the Operation Canada Digital War Diaries Project, housed at the Modern Literature and Culture Research Centre at Toronto Metropolitan University (Figure 3), where it has been digitized and made available online, along with a scholarly transcription and research contextualizing it, provided by a team of national and international experts and more than a dozen students immersing in these artefacts.

The Operation Canada Digital War Diaries Project focuses specifically on personal diaries. The term "war diary" has long been used to describe only the officers' official regimental logs, relegating all other diary writings into the more generic category of personal writings. Consequently, diaries written by soldiers and war workers overseas and by home-front workers across Canada are not accounted for, and only a fraction have been fully digitized. However, they deserve our attention because they are intricate artefacts that offer human stories as well as visual and material information, as evidenced, for example, in Matron Inga Johnson's 1917 autograph book (Figure 4). Created in the Canadian General Hospital in Étables in northern France, it visualizes not only the network of relationships but the

Figure 3: Modern Literature and Culture Research Centre, The Operation Canada Digital War Diaries Project, Landing page, 2021,
<https://wardiaries.ca/s/operationcanada/page/home>.

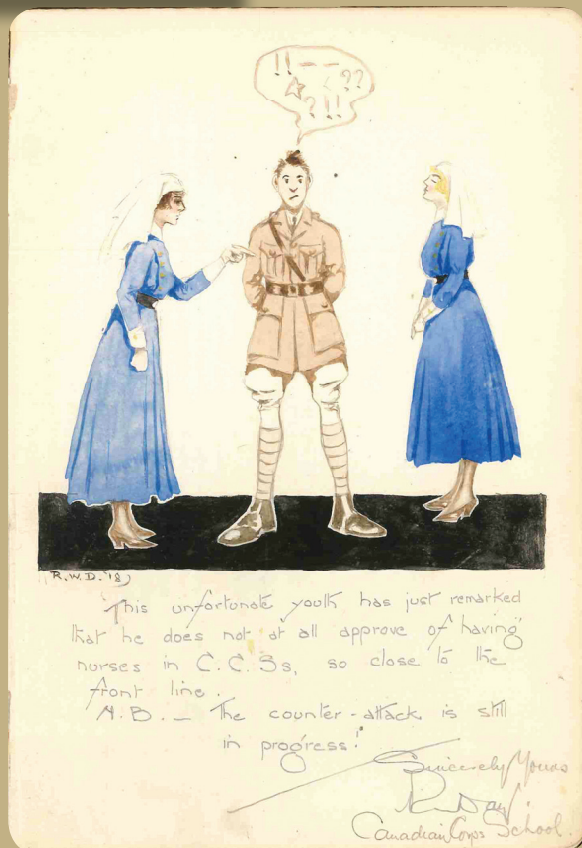


Figure 4 Inga Johnson, Drawing of Canadian "Bluebird" Nurses and a Soldier, Inga Johnson Notebook, 1917-1918, Digital Frame 87, The Operation Canada Digital War Diaries Project, MLC Research Centre, Toronto. Courtesy of Canadian War Museum Archives, Ottawa.

Canadian nurses' pride in their blue uniforms, which earned them the nickname bluebirds.

Many frontline diaries were pocket-sized notebooks, which were deposited with friends and family by soldiers on leave. Officially forbidden, often written covertly, and carried close to the body, they were the repositories for the writers' experiences, long used as primary material for other studies or more literary works but not studied as their own genre. These diaries record immediate responses through the lens of diverse witnesses at the frontlines and the home front, and so provide a more complete picture of the war's social panorama by giving insight into the human side of the war. Despite this, they have so far been mostly neglected in archives.

Diaries behind the frontlines of war include the writings of doctors, nurses, orderlies, and chaplains. For example, the Operation Canada Digital War Diaries Project gives readers full digital access to the unpublished diaries of Reverend William Andrew White (1874-1936) (**Figure 5**),

a Black Canadian chaplain born to former slaves in Virginia who moved to Nova Scotia at the age of twenty-five and attended Acadia University before being ordained as a reverend in 1903. On February 1, 1917, at the age of 42, he enlisted in the No. 2 Construction Battalion, an all-black segregated unit of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (**Figure 6**). The only Black officer in the Canadian Expeditionary Force during World War I, Captain White was also the only Black chaplain who served in the Canadian or British forces during the war. For the first time, the Operation Canada Digital War Diaries Project gives access to his voice, thoughts, and experiences.

White kept two diaries while he served in Europe with the No. 2 Construction Battalion, and his writings often reveal the intersection of war with race and religion. White critically references the racist second-class treatment of the "coloured boys," who were often accused of "faking" illness. He also provides snippets on his weekly Sunday sermons, but despite his faith, the experience took



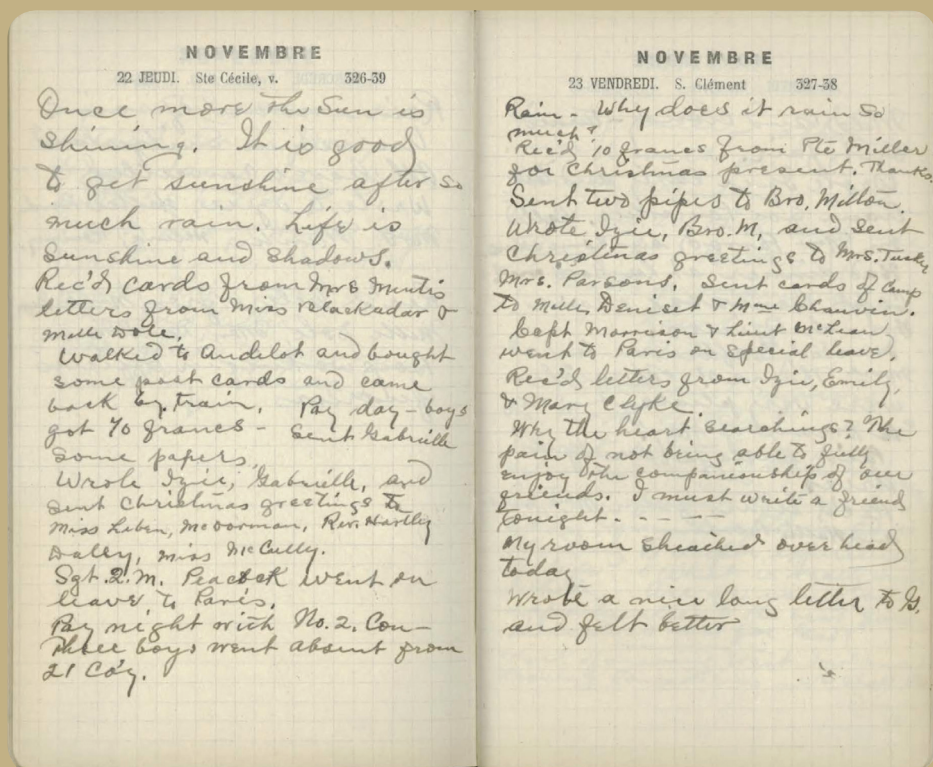
Figure 5: Captain William Andrew White, chaplain of the No. 2 Construction Battalion, Photograph ca. 1916. William Andrew White Diary Landing Page, The Operation Canada Digital War Diaries Project, MLC Research Centre, Toronto. Courtesy of Anthony Sherwood.



Figure 6: E. Mackintosh, Afro-Canadian Unit, No. 2 Construction Battalion, November 1916, Windsor Museum/ P6110.

its toll. For instance, after a comrade's death on January 16, 1918, he wrote: "It is nice to be dead and out of it – I used to think that I did not want to die but when work and worry get hold of you death is sweet." At other times, the power of nature prompted him into the philosophical: "Once more the Sun is shining. It is good to get sunshine after so much rain. Life is sunshine and shadows" (November 22, 1917) (Figure 7).

Figure 7: William Andrew White, "Once more the sun is shining. It is good to get sunshine after so much rain. Life is sunshine and shadows." Entry dated November 22, 1917, Diary of William Andrew White, 1917, Digital Frame 157, The Operation Canada Digital War Diaries Project, MLC Research Centre, Toronto. Courtesy of Library and Archives Canada.



The voices of minority writers are key in the Operation Canada Digital War Diaries Project including the war diary of Edith Anderson (1890-1996) (**Figure 8**) from Six Nations Reserve near Brantford, Ontario. Anderson's original diary has been safeguarded by her family descendants. After her death, they prepared a typed transcription,



Figure 8 *Edith Anderson*, Photograph, circa 1918-1919. Charlotte Edith Anderson Monture Diary Landing Page, The Operation Canada Digital War Diaries Project, MLC Research Centre, Toronto. Courtesy of Descendants of Charlotte Edith Anderson Monture, Ontario.

which served as our copytext, taking readers into her daily activities at the Base Hospital 23 in Vittel in northern France. This hospital unit had been

organized by Westchester County Associated Hospitals in Yonkers, NY, Anderson having trained in the United States after being denied access to nursing schools in Canada because she was Indigenous. Today, her diary shares her daily routines of caring for patients, reporting her increased load after going on night duty for two weeks, on June 6, 1918: "Had a busy day to-day and went on night duty. Had fifty-seven patients and three German prisoners to take care of."

Ten days later, still on nightshift, one of Anderson's young patients with whom she had become friends, Earl King, died, leaving her deeply affected: "Had hemorrhage at 3:15 A.M. The poor boy lost consciousness immediately. My heart was broken. Cried most of the day and could not sleep." Two days later she reports going to his funeral: "Came off night duty this A.M. Did not go to bed at all. Went for a bath then sat in the park with Jean Carruthers and wrote letters. The weather was doubtful with showers of rain and then sunshine. After dinner went to the florists and ordered flowers for my boy who died. At 3 P.M. went to his funeral. It rained through the whole ceremony and my feet were wet, but I didn't mind I paid my last respects to Earl. Retired early this evening as I had to report for duty the next day."

Besides these overseas diary accounts of crises, pain, and human connection, the Operation Canada Digital Diaries Project collects and makes accessible home-front diaries written by women and men in urban and rural settings in Canada. Illuminating the civilian experience of the war from the perspectives of home-front preoccupations, these diaries inscribe both trauma and patriotism along with minority writers' hope for integration and recognition through involvement in the war.

One of the featured home-front diarists, Ella

Isobel Rogers (1900-1963) (**Figure 9**), kept diaries through her wartime teenage years (**Figure 10**), documenting her circumstances maturing into adulthood in the rural community of Hopewell Hill, Albert County, New Brunswick. Rogers was active with the Red Cross and other organizations that



Figure 9: Ella Rogers, Photograph, ca. 1918, Ella Rogers Diary Landing Page, The Operation Canada Digital War Diaries Project, MLC Research Centre, Toronto. Courtesy of Mount Allison University Archives, 2013.14/08.

supported the war effort and often recorded her attendance at fundraisers and recruitment events. A survivor of the Spanish flu pandemic, she details its devastating effects in her diary, as on October 4, 1918, when she notes: “The school closed Wed. to prevent influenza from spreading if it should hit in the place. There are about 25 cases in Hillsboro. One

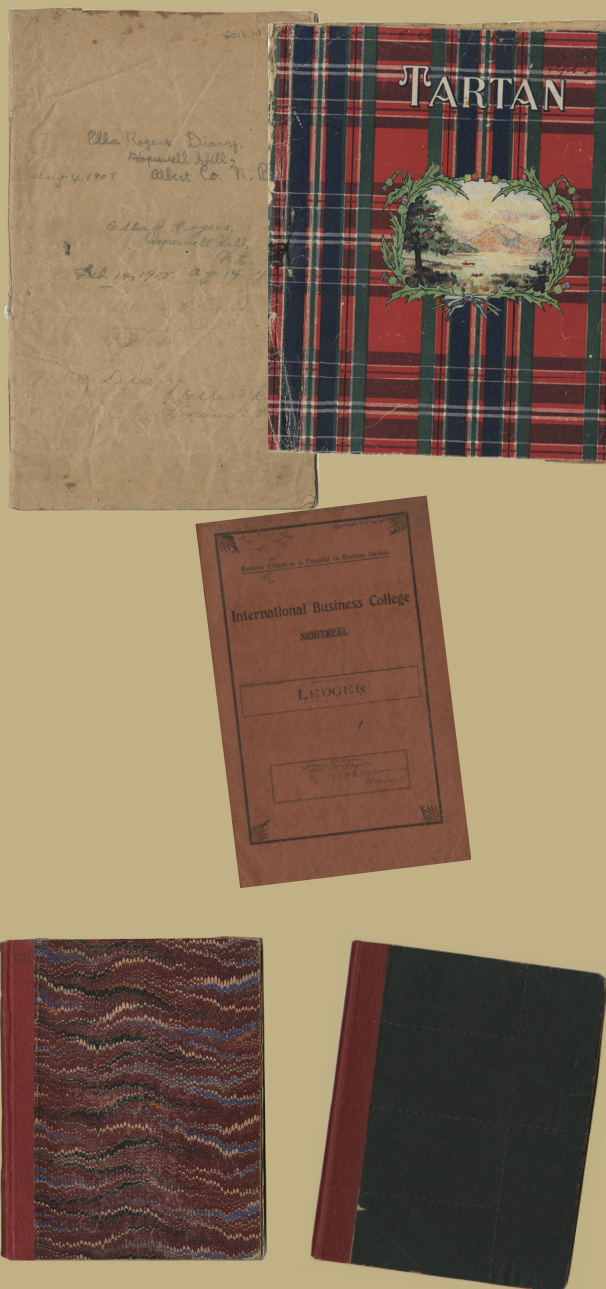


Figure 10: Ella Rogers, Diary Covers, 1908-1921; **L-R Top:** Cover, Diary of Ella Rogers, Volume 1: 1908-1915, Digital Frame 1; Cover, Diary of Ella Rogers, Volume 2: 1915-1916, Digital Frame 1; **Middle:** Cover, Diary of Ella Rogers, Volume 3: 1916, Digital Frame 1; **L-R Bottom:** Cover, Diary of Ella Rogers, Volume 4: 1916-1918, Digital Frame 1; Cover, Diary of Ella Rogers, Volume 5: 1918-1921, Digital Frame 1, The Operation Canada Digital War Diaries Project, MLC Research Centre, Toronto. Courtesy Mount Allison University Archives, Sackville, New Brunswick.

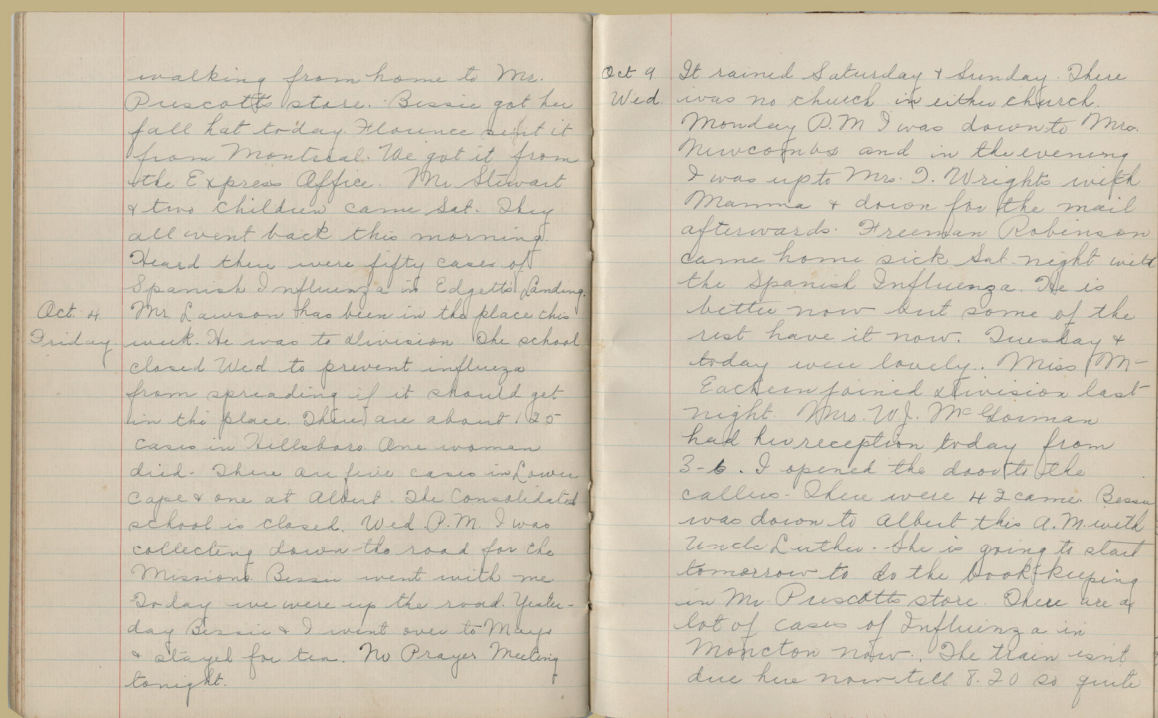


Figure 11: Ella Rogers, "The school closed Wed. to prevent influenza from spreading." Diary entry dated October 4, 1918. *Diary of Ella Rogers, Volume 4: 1916-18*, Digital Frame 59, The Operation Canada Digital War Diaries Project, MLC Research Centre, Toronto. Courtesy of Mount Allison University Archives, Sackville, New Brunswick.

woman died" (Figure 11). The rhythm of her observations reflects the rhythm of the pandemic, eerily similar to our own COVID-19 experience, with its multiple waves and the efforts at building resistance and resilience.

Other featured diaries, such as James S. Patrick's (1898-1959), capture little-known, post-war conflicts. Five weeks after the Armistice, on December 21, 1918, the twenty-year-old Patrick signed up for the Siberian Expeditionary Force, and his war diary describes his transpacific voyage from Victoria, British Columbia, to Japan, and to Vladivostok in Russia between January 12 to April 22, 1919. In his landscape-style diary, with lined paper bound in dark red leather covers, he detailed his experiences with literary flair, expressive detail, and personality (Figure 12).

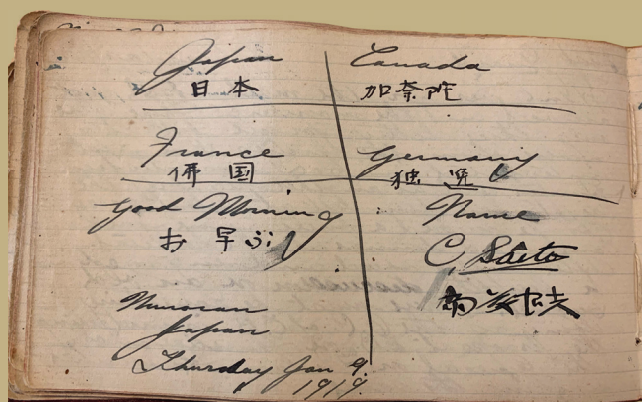


Figure 12: James S. Patrick, notes dated January 8, 1919, representing Patrick's effort to learn Japanese. *Diary of James S. Patrick, 1918-19*, Digital Frame 95, The Operation Canada Digital War Diaries Project, MLC Research Centre, Toronto. Courtesy of Archives of Ontario, North York.

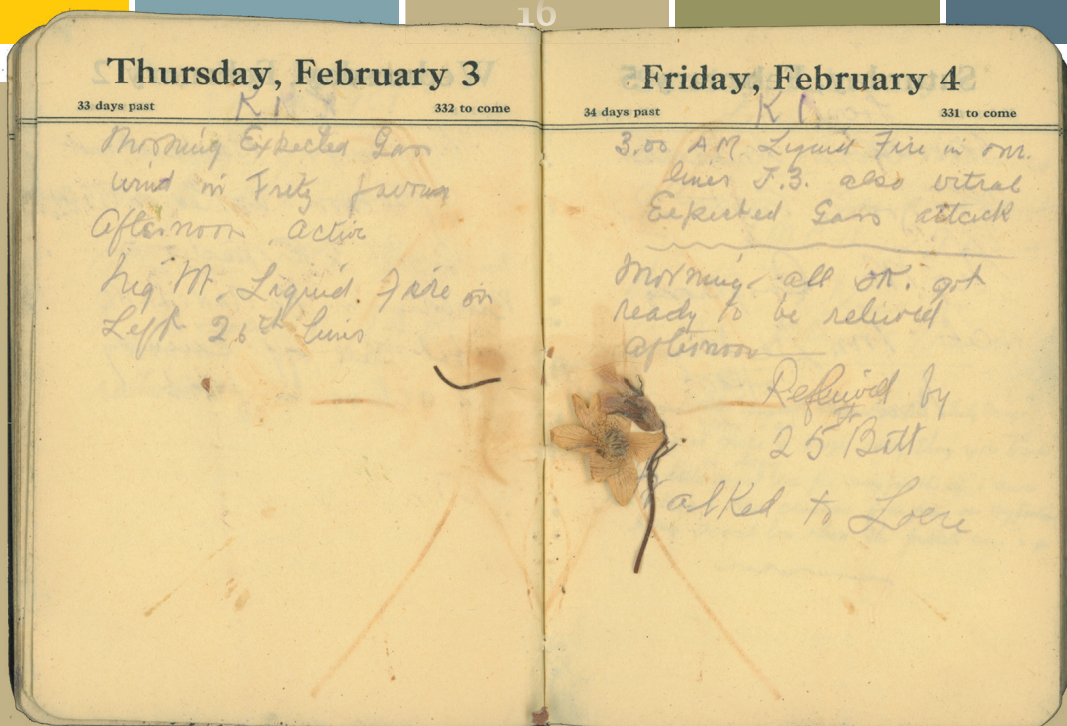


Figure 13: Clarence Booth, Pressed flower blossoms decorating diary entry dated February 4, 1916, *Diary of Clarence Booth, 1915-1916*. Digital Frame 21, The Operation Canada Digital War Diaries Project, MLC Research Centre, Toronto. Courtesy of the Canadian Centre for the Great War (Centre canadien pour la Grande Guerre), Montreal.

The dailiness of these diaries often takes on a laconic tone, asking us to read between the lines and feel what the diarist has omitted—the underlying recuperative power of emotional connection. Moreover, as ephemera that survived the war in or close to the frontline, soldiers' diaries are physical objects that tell stories. Whatever the format, the pages speak of the conditions in which the writer penned the entries — exhibiting tattered edges, smudges, faint ink, and rubbing out of a pencil. These journals often incorporate ephemera such as newspaper clippings, photographs, sketches, and drawings. Flowers are particularly moving, reminding us also of the ephemerality of life (Figure 13 and Figure 14).

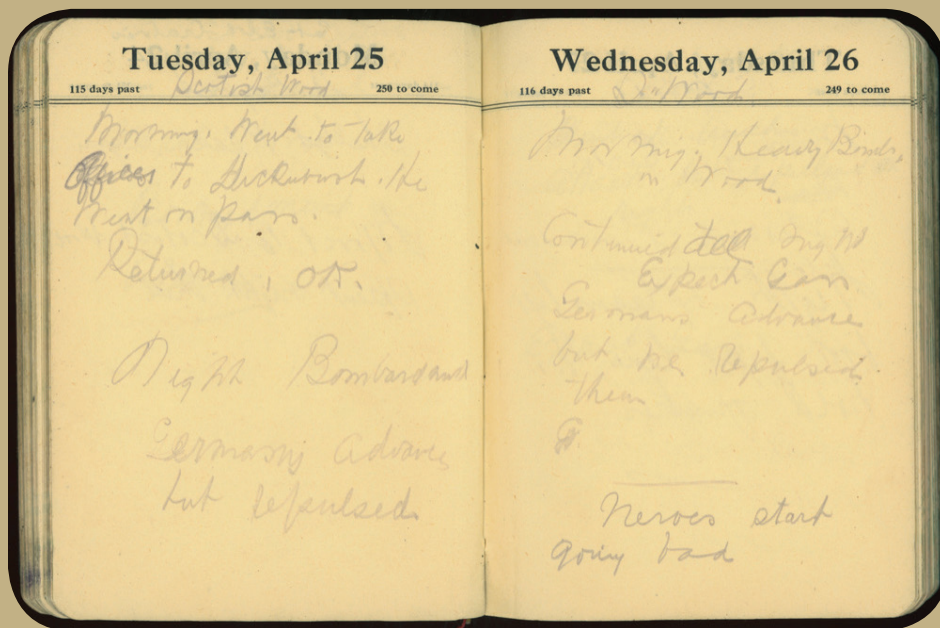
Through the lens of the war diary, the Operation Canada Digital War Diaries Project ultimately strives to reshape twenty-first century understanding of the First World War by highlighting the contributions of



Figure 14 Ruth Loggie, Pressed maple leaf, on diary page dated January 25-27, 1915. *Diary of Ruth Loggie, 1915-1916*, Digital Frame 7, The Operation Canada Digital War Diaries Project, MLC Research Centre, Toronto. Courtesy of Provincial Archives of New Brunswick, Fredericton.

combatants and non-combatants alike and by including minorities such as Indigenous diarists and people of different races, faiths, ethnicities, genders, ages, languages, and regions in Canada. Most of the diaries digitized are held in private family archives or in public archives.

Clarence Booth, "Nerves start going bad," diary entry dated April 26, 1916. *Diary of Clarence Booth, 1915-1916*. Digital Frame 62, The Operation Canada Digital War Diaries Project, MLC Research Centre, Toronto. Courtesy of the Canadian Centre for the Great War (Centre canadien pour la Grande Guerre), Montreal.



The author and her team would like to hear from people who have family diaries from the First World War. Contact adminmlc@ryerson.ca with any details, and if you would like to learn more about the project, visit <http://wardiaries.ca>.

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