

EPISTOLARY MEMORY:

First World War Letters to British Columbia

MEGAN ROBERTSON

DEAR READER, It's likely we've not yet met. I'm not sure if we ever will. However, I want to tell you about an experience I have had during the course of my research. I've decided to write you a letter, a personal reflection, because the products of scholarly work and academic pursuits can sometimes struggle to convey the emotional connections we make with the people and subjects we study. In choosing the epistolary form to express myself, I also want to convey a sense that this story is unfinished. When I began this research in 2008, I thought it would be a short-term project focused on transcribing a series of letters held by the University of British Columbia Library's Rare Books and Special Collections Division (hereafter Special Collections).¹ Ultimately, it has become part of an ongoing exchange – a continuation of a dialogue that began in 1915 when Harry Ralston penned a letter to Gertrude Walker as he travelled past Sicamous, British Columbia, on his way to Halifax and a steamship that would carry him to Europe and the Great War. Harry and his future wife Gertrude were like thousands of other British Columbians who were separated as a result of the war. Similar collections of letters exist in archives across Canada; some have even been transcribed for an online audience via the Canadian Letters and Images Project hosted by the Department of History at Vancouver Island University. Initiatives to digitize letters have also been undertaken

¹ This article developed out of a seminar led by Professor Patricia Badir and Professor Siân Echard. I would like to thank them for supporting my experimentation with academic writing. I would also like to thank the staff of the UBC Library's Rare Books and Special Collections Division, in particular Katherine Kalsbeek and George Brandak, for their assistance and guidance during my research. Last, I must acknowledge the contributions of Keith Ralston and Mollie Ralston. The Ralstons' enthusiasm for my work and their continued generosity with their time, photographs, and stories exponentially enriched my project. Keith Ralston's death in June 2009 was a great loss, and I have hesitated to write further about the Henry Ralston Fonds without his critical eye reviewing my work. Mollie Ralston, who consistently offered encouragement and support, died in December 2011. I hope that they would be pleased with this piece.

in New Zealand, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Europe.² Part of the appeal of these projects is their supposed permanence in a quickly changing world. There are no Canadians now left alive who served in the Great War. Their personal memories are gone forever. Yet their stories, and especially their letters, endure in communicative networks and contemporary stories.

In the twenty-first century, when personal correspondence is increasingly electronic, letters composed on paper, by hand, suggest a particular type of interaction – just as they did nearly a century ago.³ As I click through the letters of men who served in the Great War on the Canadian Letters and Images Project website, I find myself skimming through the paragraphs of transcribed correspondence that appear before me in a standardized font style and size. The website is a tremendously valuable archive in that it showcases historical documents, but I gain access to it via the same interface I use to check my e-mail, create word documents, store music, and edit photographs. Gaining access to war letters on my computer provides limited exposure to what literary critic Stephen Greenblatt terms “affective resonance and wonder.”⁴ While I appreciate the hours of careful work that have made it possible for me to view the letters online, the actual process of reading has more to do with my ability to employ a type of technical proficiency in gaining access to the computer-mediated memory of a digital archive.⁵ It can be a challenge to “make a fuss” about an intangible digital archive – and it was precisely this instruction that I was given as a participant in a graduate seminar: “make a fuss” about a particular collection within

² These include collections made available through institutionally supported websites like New Zealand History Online, the Smithsonian National Postal Museum website, London’s Imperial War Museum website, and Europeana.

³ Charles Bazerman points out that different letter genres call upon different levels of interpretation and understanding on the part of their respective readers. He notes: “Interpreting even the most ordinary junk mail solicitations for a credit card requires an understanding among other things of the postal system, folded paper envelopes, advertising and direct mailing, promised inducements, the modern bank and credit card system, modern application forms, store credit card transactions, monthly statements, internal record keeping, check payments, and competition among various credit providers” (16). Personal correspondence addressed with our individual names, rather than “occupant,” suggests a series of entirely different social relationships, yet these personal letters travel along the same routes as bills and advertisements. See Charles Bazerman, “Letters and the Social Grounding of Differentiated Genres,” in *Letter Writing as a Social Practice*, ed. David Barton and Nigel Hall, 15-29 (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2000).

⁴ This notion is discussed by Stephen Greenblatt in an essay on museum exhibitions, affect, and knowledge acquisition. See Stephen Greenblatt, “Resonance and Wonder,” *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts* 43, 4 (1990): 11-34.

⁵ James Wertsch, *Voices of Collective Remembering* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 11-13.

Special Collections, make a collection my own and explain why it was worth getting excited about. If I was going to make a fuss, I wanted to have both an intellectual and an emotional connection to my object of study.

With my interest in Canadian experiences of the Great War, I called upon the technical proficiency that makes it possible to search library databases. At this point, I cannot remember what terms I entered or if I was at home at my desk, in the library, or a campus study space when my online searching returned results for something called the “Henry Ralston Fonds.” Now, I can recite verbatim lines from the letters I found in that collection and I very much remember the sensory experience of sitting in Special Collections holding in my hands letters that were written from the Western Front. The library catalogue includes a limited description of the fonds that relates that Ralston enlisted in the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) in 1914, fought in the Great War, was severely wounded but survived, and died in Victoria, British Columbia, in 1943. When I first consulted the collection in the basement of the Irving K. Barber Learning Centre, I discovered nearly two hundred complete letters, most numbering several pages, dozens of unidentified fragments, newspaper clippings, postcards, and other ephemera tucked into an archival box.

Working with the Ralston Fonds takes time. When I began this project I wanted to make sure that it would be worth my time in that it would be something interesting for me to pursue; if Ralston had served out the entire conflict as a supply clerk in England,⁶ I probably would have returned to my online searching. My first trip to UBC’s Special Collections coincided with my ongoing research into the disastrous 1 July 1916 offensive that marked the beginning of the Battle of the Somme. I hastily turned to the folder containing the May–August 1916 letters to see whether or not Ralston had been involved in the battle. The last letter dated prior to 1 July was written on 26 June 1916. Over a month went by before 4 August 1916, one of the longest epistolary silences in the collection,⁷ when Ralston used a single piece of YMCA

⁶ In fact, there are letters from a supply clerk in the collection. Gertrude kept up correspondence with several friends who served overseas, including Steve Temple who acted as a quartermaster in Surrey for most of the war. Temple’s letters to Gertie are jovial and relate his busy schedule of filling orders. He assures Gertie in the autumn of 1917: “Everything is going fine and dandy and as you know the war is still on the go.” These lighthearted notes pale in comparison to the glossed over descriptions of battle and feelings of uncertainty that appear in letters written by Gertie’s friends who served in combat roles.

⁷ In his investigation of early epistolary culture, Gary Schneider writes: “When [an] epistolary delay was prolonged, it threatened to become [an] epistolary silence, where communication

paper to apologize to Gertie for the delay since his last letter: “I’m sorry you had to wait so long for a letter from me. I don’t remember just what happened that prevented me from writing.” In one of his shortest letters to the woman who would become his wife, Harry went on to relate sitting outside of his dugout with “poppies growing not ten yards away and wild flowers of every kind.” The unexpressed experience that lies between the apologetic opening and the emotive vision of flowers gave me pause. The very existence of the letter asserts the fact of Ralston’s survival and is a promise for the future: I am alive; I will write again.

How the letters came to reside at UBC, and this piece you now read, is the product of a network of experiences that have, in the words of sociologist Stephan Fuchs, “forg[ed] relationships that reach into the surroundings so that something that used to matter *here* now matters *there* [then] as well. Otherwise an event remains just this – an event, gone when it is over.”⁸ For me, the Ralston letters help to transform an event that happened nearly a century ago and demonstrate that those who lived through the Great War were not so very different from you or me in their concerns for family, friends, and their dreams for their futures. The letters matter now more than ever because the relationships that sustained their existence have begun to fade: Ralston’s son and daughter-in-law, Keith and Mollie, who provided invaluable assistance for this project have recently died; and new relationships, in the present, are required to ensure that British Columbians’ experiences of the Great War are not relegated to institutional archival memory but,⁹ rather, continue to be connected to how we think about our own relationships and responsibilities to others in a world in which conflicts large and small persist.

was broken off entirely – a state of affairs quite unsettling for one expecting a letter.” See Gary Schneider, *The Culture of Epistolarity: Vernacular Letters and Letter Writing in Early Modern England* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005), 88. This spectre of silence and the sense of a void continues to haunt written exchanges even in the era of electronic messaging. The expectation of an “epistolary reciprocity” (Schneider, *Epistolarity*, 61) is as true today as it would have been during the Great War and in the centuries before the conflict. Gertie was sending letters to a place she had never seen and one that, if he hoped to pass the military censors, Harry could not fully describe for her. The faith in eventual epistolary reciprocity – that is, to keep writing in the two- to three-week interval when no word was received – would have been very strong. Extended epistolary silences that became indefinite could mean one of two things: the letter was lost in transit or the letter writer was incapacitated or dead.

⁸ Stephan Fuchs, *Against Essentialism: A Theory of Culture and Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 306.

⁹ Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” *Representations* 26 (1989): 7–24.

EPISTOLARY IMAGINATION: LETTERS AND SCHOLARS

I've not forgotten about you, reader. You're still there reading at a desk, or relaxed in your chair, or even reviewing this piece online. I'm writing this and directing it to an imagined audience and in a way, I like to think, creating relationships with people who may respond – in future articles, in comments to the editor, or perhaps in person one day. Letters imply a relationship, whether real or imagined, and there are conventions about their content and format that establish (or remind one) about social contexts and connections. Literary scholars David Barton and Nigel Hall note:

As a genre, letters have specific forms of deixis [contextual understanding], this is ways of referring to the writer and the intended reader and to space and time. The writer is present in the letter, often through the use of the word *I* and in the signing of the letter. There is usually a specific reader, or readers, in mind and they are invoked in the salutation and in the use of *you*. The writer constructs an intended reader in the text. Time and space are important in that spatial distance is often the main reason for the letter's existence and there is a time lag between the writing and the reading. Two worlds are invoked: the here and now of the writer and the here and now of the reader.¹⁰

I sit here, writing away and thinking back to the days I spent in the library imagining the “there and then” of Harry’s and Gertie’s respective writings. I also think of who you might be in your own “here and now.” The epistolary form bridges the gap between the real experience of the writer and that experience as it is imagined by the reader; it also bridges the spatial and temporal distances that can separate a writer and reader. If we think of the Ralston letters as the material record of a series of relationships that matter both at the time of writing and in the present, it is helpful to consider the communicative and stylistic conventions of the epistolary form itself. Letters can be casual or formal, personal or public, scribbled in haste or composed with careful contemplation. In fact, much of the writing we do today shares elements associated with the letter-writing genre; for academic writers, this is perhaps doubly true as open calls for conferences find their way to electronic mailboxes, reference letters are dutifully requested and completed, agendas and minutes circulated, and (sometimes) intriguing internet links forwarded on a daily basis. Despite these echoes of epistolarity that haunt our

¹⁰ David Barton and Nigel Hall, *Letter Writing as a Social Practice* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2000), 6.

digital communication in the academy, some of the conventions of more formal scholarly writing have little to do with establishing or encouraging a reciprocal dialogue. Literary scholar Susan Koppelman argues that academics tend to turn away from the epistolary form, and she questions the preference for writing “long essays that are speeches or position papers instead of writing letters to each other.”¹¹ Scholarly writing is a particular genre. It is a type of exchange in which an author writes for an intended reader, assumes a certain shared understanding, and hopes to communicate her or his ideas. Generic conventions have evolved since the establishment of “epistolary networks” between scholars in Western Europe during the Renaissance,¹² when learned men (and they were almost exclusively male)¹³ exchanged ideas and engaged in debate through letters. Therefore, the piece you are reading now has a long genealogy if we consider that scholars have been writing to one another for centuries.¹⁴

In writing this piece I am attempting to experiment with and extend the idea of a scholarly letter. What makes this a scholarly letter – circulated in an academic journal – is the use of citation. While I will shortly move on to describing and sharing some of the letters of the Ralston Fonds, I have already framed this letter as a piece of academic writing by “systematically consult[ing] other research, and estimat[ing] its relevance and proximity to [my] work,” in effect “summoning ... voices to substantiate, by accord or contrast” my own writing.¹⁵ One of my goals is to provide you with a sense of how I have continued to work with and beyond an archive collection in a self-aware manner that acknowledges the personal relationships that created the collection and the historical and contemporary scholarship that frames my understanding of it. I have introduced you to some of the academic theorists

¹¹ Anne L. Bower, “Dear ___: In Search of New (Old) Forms of Critical Address,” in *Epistolary Histories: Letters, Fiction, Culture*, ed. Amanda Gilroy and W.M. Verhoeven (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000), 156.

¹² Fuchs, *Against Essentialism*, 37–22.

¹³ Olga Kenyon describes the gendered division of letter writing according to which, historically, men were instructed in the art of composition while women were excluded from epistolary education such that their letters were (and to some extent still are) viewed as personal or domestic in nature. See Olga Kenyon, *800 Years of Women's Letters* (Stroud: A. Sutton, 1992).

¹⁴ The study of letters as a form of social investigation has a relatively shorter history: William Thomas and Florian Znaniecki's *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, published as a five-volume set between 1918 and 1920, was one of the first sociological examinations of hundreds of letters sent between Polish immigrants in Chicago and their communities of origin in Poland in the first decades of the twentieth century.

¹⁵ Janet Giltrow, *Academic Writing: Writing and Reading in the Disciplines* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2002), 10.

and thinkers I have consulted in preparing this letter, but I should now turn to the Ralstons and their letters.

DEAR GERTIE

I should like to be sitting in Beacon Hill Park this afternoon instead of a trench "Somewhere in France."

Henry Ralston – known as Harry in all of his letters – sent his first missives to Victoria and Gertrude Walker, “Gertie,” in an effort to relate his journey from British Columbia to England, a trip that took eighteen days. He wrote often and descriptively about his trip across the country: of his cousins meeting the train in Kamloops; of his family travelling to Swift Current, Saskatchewan, to see him off and take photographs with him; of seeing Quebec for the first time (in his letter of 20 February 1915, Harry notes that Montreal was a relatively quiet place, telling Gertie that “most of the people were French so it was pretty dull”); and of how he used his lifebelt for a writing desk aboard the *Megantic* prior to his arrival at the Napier Barracks, southeast of Dover. Harry’s first letters to Gertie number dozens of pages. Most of the Ralston letters follow a fairly standard format: Harry opens with the date and the place (for many of the letters the place is “Somewhere in France”), and then he comments on when he received his last letter from Gertie. Unlike English soldiers serving in France, who could expect delivery of their letters in two to three days, Harry’s letters, travelling to British Columbia via steamship and train, arrived in Victoria more than two weeks after he sent them. On 7 December 1916, Harry wrote to Gertie: “It is wonderful ... how you get to know a person through correspondence. Each letter tells what mood you are in.” However, while letters can reveal the writer’s mood, they can only capture the moment of writing. Letters, Clara Brant notes in her essay on epistolary history, once written, “will never relent, recede, or retract” the information they communicate; the material letter is an unchanging record that can be consulted again and again.¹⁶ Gertie kept all of Harry’s letters, and it is likely that she read and re-read them during the five years they were apart. Harry was at a disadvantage – letters to the front were often destroyed after they were read for reasons of military security as well as

¹⁶ Clara Brant, “Love Stories? Epistolary Histories of Mary Queen of Scots,” in *Epistolary Histories: Letters, Fiction, Culture*, ed. Amanda Gilroy and W.M. Verhoeven (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000), 79.

practicality. Before his first trip to the front in 1915, Harry told Gertie: “I had to burn your letters they were too heavy to carry I saved the one starting My Dear Harry the others are in smoke.” As I read Harry’s letters, I got used to piecing together their one-sided conversation and to imagining what Gertie might have written to provoke particular responses from Harry, whose emotions understandably ranged from sentimental and nostalgic to frustrated and depressed.

While I was busy guessing what Gertie might have been like, she suddenly appeared in the records: on 26 November 1916, Gertie wrote Harry a Christmas letter (Figure 1). These fourteen pages describe Gertie’s worries about what to give people for Christmas, news about her work and the courses she was taking, and gossip about common friends in Victoria. Such letters *to* the front from Canada are extremely rare, and I immediately wanted to know why this particular letter had been saved. Although I turned to Veterans Affairs Canada for help in identifying individuals named in the letters, and consulted online resources for information about the particular dates and places of battles, I could not always answer my specific questions about Harry and Gertie. However, I was beginning to see the value of the collection as a whole. The breadth of the collection, which spans more than three years, allowed me to make connections between certain letters, and I could trace Harry’s references to this particular letter *from* Gertie. He noted that he received her letter on 31 December 1916; and on 24 November 1917, he wrote: “Looking forward to a Christmas letter – I’ve carried last year’s eleven months now. It’s getting badly crumpled. I need another.” On 2 January 1918, Harry noted that he returned a letter to Gertie for her to keep safe; the more I read, the more the letters made sense in relation to one another.¹⁷ The fact that Harry kept Gertie’s Christmas letter, and that Gertie subsequently preserved the hundreds of letters she received, demonstrates that these letters are more than communicative acts: they are memorial artefacts that were and are carefully stored for safekeeping.

Aside from his posting as the librarian at the Vimy Ridge University in the spring of 1917¹⁸ – from Harry’s letters this appointment sounds

¹⁷ According to Barton and Hall, letter writing remains one of the “most widespread form[s] of sustained writing” even in the contemporary period. While diaries and autobiographies are still fashioned on paper and in electronic form, people have “distinctive memories of times in their lives when letter writing had been of great significance to them.” See Barton and Hall, *Letter Writing*, 2.

¹⁸ Vimy Ridge University (VRU) was part of an initiative by the Canadian government to provide servicemen with vocational and academic education as the war began to draw to a close. The makeshift facilities that were established in France at VRU were one part of the

12.
 Special message for
 Christmas, only I shall
 think of you very often
 that day & hope you
 get my parcel, & that its
 contents helps to cheer
 you. I prepared things
 with special care. I
 also trust the war
 will end soon, & that
 you may be privileged
 to spend the next winter
 in Canada & perhaps Victoria.
 Then I expect we'll have
 a great deal to say to
 one another & have
 a happy reunion.
 My thoughts often flit
 across the sea, & I wonder
 what you are doing. My
 Aunt G. Beall one of those
 P.C.'s, I'm afraid she's
 got one, too, however it
 doesn't matter really, only
 I believe she thinks every
 single solitary soldier
 she sees met was
 struck with her, even you.

Figure 1. Gertrude Walker to Harry Ralston, 26 November 1916, Victoria (British Columbia, Canada), Henry Ralston Fonds, University of British Columbia Library Rare Books and Special Collections, Vancouver, Canada.

like a favour from a Captain William Gilmore, a chaplain serving with the CEF who knew Ralston before the war – his work involved long stretches of tedium punctuated by disturbing moments of chaos. In his letter of 22 May 1915, he describes his first experience of attending to the injured: “I expected to feel queer at the sight of blood but it did not bother me at all. It seemed as if I had lost all sense of sympathy and was handling so much beef.” Harry’s writing is frank but not gratuitous. The evidence suggests that Gertie was not a delicate woman who recoiled at the description of injuries or at Harry’s condemnation of the conflict: in the autumn of 1917, Harry tells her that he and his fellow soldiers “are simply a cog in the wheel of this war. No one cares if we live or die! The loss of any one of us would not effect [*sic*] this war in the slightest.” The relative openness with which Harry spoke about his feelings shows the growing depth of his relationship with Gertie. While Harry struggled with his own experience of the conflict, Gertie actively contributed on the home front – attending fundraisers, writing to soldiers, sending care packages, and taking Red Cross training in first aid with hopes of travelling to Europe. Harry told her on 16 November 1916: “Don’t come over. I’d be real peaved [*sic*] if you did I want you to stay at home where you are safe so that there will be a little girl waiting for my return. I can picture that return to meet you once more would go a long way towards healing this aching body from all this horror. You have no idea of the gastly [*sic*] sights we see.” Harry’s letters include sobering accounts of his anxieties: one of his brothers was badly wounded, and he feared for the health of his mother when she received the news; the war continued with no end in sight; and he worried that he has asked Gertie to wait too long for his return. At times, he seems to disregard the dangers of the war, as he does in his 6 June 1917 letter in which he thanks Gertie for her care package: “Ate some cake before taking water to the line – A good trip as trips go. Had some gas sent over us. Some put on respirators. I didn’t. I had a large piece of cake when I got home.” In the same letter, Harry gently teases Gertie about her advocacy for women’s suffrage. A woman’s right to vote is a topic that Harry returns to more than once in his letters, answering Gertie’s letters first in jest, then in a more serious tone, going so far as to suggest that a woman voting was an act against God. This appeal to Gertie’s religiosity comes

Khaki University headed by Henry Marshall Tory, the president of the University of Alberta, who served as a colonel during the Great War. Tim Cook provides an excellent history of the Khaki University and includes a discussion of the founding and the activities of VRU. See Tim Cook, “From Destruction to Construction: The Khaki University of Canada, 1917-1919,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 37, 1 (2002): 109-43.

after Harry attempts to argue that, if women have the right to vote, then they have the right to defend their country as soldiers; and that if women vote and continue to seek employment outside the home, they would not give up jobs to returning veterans.¹⁹

Gertie was very much a “new woman” of the twentieth century.²⁰ Born in Camlachie, Ontario, in 1884, Gertie moved with her family to Saskatchewan as a young girl. She travelled west with a family from Saskatchewan, vacationing in California with them before settling in Victoria, where she worked as a bookkeeper for their business. As a young woman living on her own in British Columbia’s capital, Gertie created a social circle that enabled her to participate in community and political life in active ways, including church life, Red Cross nursing sessions, fundraisers, and letter circles.²¹ Her relationship with Harry became formal when he walked her home from a YMCA dance in January 1915. The young man from Birtle, Manitoba, had travelled to the North Thompson River in British Columbia to work on his cousin’s farm. When the war began in the summer of 1914, Harry helped finish the harvest before enlisting and travelling to the coast to begin his training. Neither Gertie or Harry could be thought of as impulsive romantics: at the ages of thirty-one and twenty-eight, respectively, both Gertie and Harry were adults with their own lives when Harry was deployed.

¹⁹ British Columbia women received the right to vote on 5 April 1917. Carol Bacchi’s *Liberation Deferred? The Ideas of English Canadian Suffragists, 1877–1918* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983), describes the social and political forces that contributed to the successive enfranchisement of Canadian women beginning in 1916. It is not difficult to imagine that Gertie would have played some role in advocating for the right to vote. In her 1916 Christmas letter, one of the closing comments reflects her excitement at the change in government that would ultimately lead to women’s enfranchisement: she notes that “Our new Liberal Government took office” the previous week.

²⁰ Susan Grayzel’s *Women and the First World War* (New York: Routledge, 2002) provides a discussion specifically about women’s roles throughout the conflict. Veronica Strong-Boag’s *The New Day Recalled: Lives of Girls and Women in English Canada, 1919–1939* (Toronto: Penguin, 1988) also offers insight into the social and political realities of women’s lives in early twentieth-century Canada. While the “new woman” phrase has its origins as early as the 1880s, the larger realities and demands of increasingly enfranchised, employed, and liberated women in Western industrialized nations are key issues that come to the forefront of public life at the same time as the 1914–18 conflict.

²¹ Robert Rutherford’s discussion of gendered roles in *Hometown Horizons* suggests that events like Red Cross sessions and YMCA socials provided women with “many activities [that] served to legitimize incursions into the war effort at home that expanded women’s power.” See Robert Rutherford, *Hometown Horizons: Local Responses to Canada’s Great War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004), 214. Women, Rutherford goes on to note, “actively mapped out territories and prerogatives that proved significant in scale and scope” (214–15). From Harry’s correspondence and the ephemera in the collection, as well as my interviews with Keith and Mollie Ralston, it seems certain that Gertie was a financially and politically independent woman with her own strongly held beliefs.

Harry's dreams of studying to become a minister were heartened in his final posting during the war. As the librarian at the Vimy Ridge University, he was able to attend a number of courses and sermons and was called upon to deliver a lecture when the expected speaker failed to appear. In his 12 May 1918 letter, Harry told Gertie: "I love the work but it means that we are not to have a home for at least six years. I've had so much of this life that a home means so much to me. I know we are to sacrifice everything to spread the gospel." Harry's letters over the next two months offered Gertie an ultimatum: she would decide if they were to be together, but he had his mind set on ministry. By the end of the summer, the two appear to have resolved to be together. The letters come to an end in January 1919 as Harry endured demobilization. I imagined that Harry and Gertie were reunited and that his goal of becoming a minister was realized. I closed the file on the letters and began to wonder what became of the Ralstons.

BEYOND THE ARCHIVE: TEXT AND CONTEXT

Both Harry's and Gertie's worlds changed in unimaginable ways in the four years of their correspondence, and, at times, I felt like a voyeur. In her study of love letters, Brant suggests that people like me who read through the personal and originally private correspondence held in an archival collection are engaged in a type of "snooping sanctioned by scholarship."²² Brant self-deprecatingly writes that the "single-figure of the critic gate-crashes a relationship between two people, in willful [*sic*] intrusion on intimacy."²³ I think phrases like "gate-crasher" and "willful intrusion" might be a little excessive in describing what I was doing in the archives – at least I hope they are. Harry's letters are addressed to an individual reader – Gertie – but he knew when he was sending them that at least one other person would read through his writing. All letters sent via military mail were subject to being censored by an officer. In his letter of 23 May 1917, Harry apologizes for the brevity of his three-page missive; he tells Gertie that he does not want his newly arrived senior officer to read his more private thoughts: "He's just a kid." In my reading of the letters, as a conscientious overhearer, Harry is nothing but a "proper gentleman" towards Gertie. The Ralston letters are far more than sentimental love letters; like any letter, and any collection

²² Clara Brant, "Love Stories? Epistolary Histories of Mary Queen of Scots," in *Epistolary Histories: Letters, Fiction, Culture*, ed. Amanda Gilroy and W.M. Verhoeven (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000), 74.

²³ *Ibid.*

of correspondence, they are, as sociologist Piergiorgio Corbetta notes, the “product of the interaction between two persons” with particular emotions and motivations.²⁴ Deborah Montgomerie’s *Love in the Time of War: Letter Writing in the Second World War* provides insight into the phenomena of personal letters in times of war as she investigates epistolary exchanges between New Zealander soldiers and their families in the 1939–45 conflict. She writes that “thinking about people’s letters and the place of war in their lives encourages us to examine the process by which individual stories are transformed into history, and history into nationalist myths. For all their apparent simplicity they are complex documents.”²⁵ While Montgomerie’s comments arise from her work with particular letters, in a particular nation, and during a particular conflict, her description of how war letters evolve from personal correspondence to national mythology depicts a pattern to which many contemporary Canadian accounts of the Great War correspond.²⁶

One of the emotionally attractive aspects of reading other peoples’ letters is the idea that we are learning about an experience from those who were actually there. For Canadians, the Great War was one of the first occasions in which individuals who actively participated in historical events took the matter of writing history into their own hands by publishing pamphlets and memoirs in the years shortly after the conflict.²⁷ In their edited volume of Canadian letters sent home from twentieth-century wars, Paul Grescoe and Audrey Grescoe note: “The letters Canadians have written while fighting wars ... are proud and self-deprecating, stoic and complaining, brave and fearful, tender and violent, funny and poignant. They tell us something about what it means to be Canadian, and what it means to be alive.”²⁸ The profound observations that soldiers and their families reveal in letters emerge from individual attempts to find ways of making sense of a world that, at

²⁴ Piergiorgio Corbetta, *Social Research: Theory, Methods and Techniques – The Use of Documents* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003), 9.

²⁵ Deborah Montgomerie, *Love in the Time of War: Letter Writing in the Second World War* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2005), 135.

²⁶ A variety of works by Canadian historians, novelists, and playwrights rely on personal letters as critical elements in describing the Great War. These include, but are not limited to: Gwyn’s *Tapestry of War*, David Macfarlane’s *The Danger Tree*, Jack Hodgins’s *Broken Ground*, and R.H. Thomson’s *The Lost Boys*.

²⁷ Tim Cook’s excellent volume, *Clio’s Warriors: Canadian Historians and the Writing of the World Wars* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2006) on the historiography associated with the Canadian experience of conflict, offers insight into the sensationalizing of war accounts by publishers as well as the struggle between the official public history of the Great War and the multiple popular accounts published by regiments and returned veterans.

²⁸ Paul Grescoe and Audrey Grescoe, *The Book of War Letters: 100 Years of Private Canadian Correspondence* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2003), 9.

times, seems to coalesce into a continuum bound by polarities: the veneer of normality and selective forgetting that covers one's home life and on-leave allowances at one end, the confusion and terror of the battles themselves at the other, and, in the middle, an immense time of waiting, of not knowing what will happen next but all the while hoping for the words of a loved one. One of the most well-known Canadian works to illustrate this sense of waiting in hope is Sandra Gwyn's *Tapestry of War*. Gwyn draws on the private correspondence of Ethel Chadwick, Agar Adamson, and Talbot Papineau (among others) to provide a view of life in Canada and of Canadians in Europe beginning in the summer of 1914 and continuing through the aftermath of the conflict following the 1918 armistice.²⁹ Gwyn juxtaposes the seemingly ordinary lives of Chadwick and Adamson, who both survived the war to live in a world that was socially and politically unimaginable before the conflict, with the much-elegized figure of Papineau, who is killed in action in 1917.

Noting self-effacingly by way of introduction, "so much for the Big Picture. This is a book about people," Gwyn, – author, historian, archival researcher, and storyteller – has no more than a shadowy presence in *Tapestry*.³⁰ I know that Gwyn is the one doing the work in the archives and that she is the one to orchestrate the movement of people in *Tapestry*, but her work is not an archive story. The closest Gwyn comes to describing her own work in the archive, her own experience of engaging with the primary documents on which she draws, is when she concludes her writing on Ethel Chadwick by describing how the Ottawa socialite's personal papers ended up in an institutional repository after Chadwick died in 1975: "The caretaker of her building parceled up the cargo of journals and scrapbooks and photo albums and deposited them at the National Archives. There she survives for posterity in a long row of brown cardboard boxes."³¹ This gesture towards Chadwick's place in the archive, while somewhat morbid in its suggestion of a disembodied presence, fails to acknowledge Gwyn's reanimation of Chadwick's life to serve her purposes of writing a national history about the 1914-18 conflict.

²⁹ A noted collection of Great War letters gathered from personal archives is that of Vera Brittain, whose correspondence with her brother, her fiancée, and two friends – all four of whom were killed during the conflict – provides profound insight into the British experience of the Great War. Brittain, who served as a nurse, first published the collection of letters as a memoir in 1933 under the title *Testament of Youth*. More contemporary interest in the Great War led editors Alan Bishop and Mark Bostridge, in 1998, to produce a volume of Brittain's letters as well as those of her four correspondents with annotations and historical commentary. See Alan Bishop and Mark Bostridge, eds., *Letters from a Lost Generation* (London: Little, 1998).

³⁰ Sandra Gwyn, *Tapestry of War: A Private View of Canadians in the Great War* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1992), xviii.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 204.

I will likely never read through Chadwick's records in the National Archives; for me, she lives on in the story that Gwyn has created.

BEYOND THE ARCHIVE: AFFECTIVE STORIES

What is an archive story? Antoinette Burton's edited volume, *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History*, includes sixteen encounters between researchers and the archives. These archival stories take place in North America, Europe, South Asia, the Pacific, and in the virtual world of cyberspace. Burton asserts that "archives do not simply arrive or emerge fully formed, nor are they innocent of struggles for power in either their creation or their interpretative application."³² The use of the term "archives" here does not refer to the material records housed by an institutional repository but, rather, to the extended and complex social and political network of people and circumstances that surround every document held by an archive. Burton notes that the purpose of *Archive Stories* is to "illustrate that archives are always already stories" and that the "stories – in whatever narrative form – embed as many secrets and distortions as archives themselves; their telling encodes selective disclosures, half truths, and partial pasts."³³ In writing this letter to you, reader, I am telling my archive story, I am emphasizing certain events and excluding others. In trying to represent my experience, I know that I have already forgotten certain things and possibly imagined others to fill in my story as I am writing it here. If I were to imagine myself as a character in a story, I believe I would share much in common with the unnamed visitor to the archives in Timothy Findlay's *The Wars*. My time spent with the Ralston letters in Special Collections mirrors the experience of Findlay's anonymous character: "All you have to do is sign them out and carry them across the room. Spread over table tops, a whole age lies in fragments under the lamps. *The war to end all wars*. All you can hear is the wristwatch on your arm. Outside, it snows."³⁴ When I conducted my research at the library, it rarely snowed, but, its being Vancouver, the rain was never far away. Entering Special Collections always requires a peeling of layers: removing rain jackets, storing umbrellas, stowing book bags. Here, more than anywhere else in the library, patrons must conform

³² Antoinette Burton, ed., *Archive Stories: Facts, Fiction, and the Writing of History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 6.

³³ *Ibid.*, 20.

³⁴ Timothy Findlay, *The Wars* (Toronto: Penguin Books, 1977), 3.

to rules of conduct and decorum. You must not leave your mark on the collection: security cameras and library staff are watching.

The rules and procedures associated with any special collections division are designed to provide access to records without jeopardizing the material media contained in the archive. Some of my fondest memories of working with the Ralston collection involve discovering the smudges, ink blots, and marks of human life that were sent, like ephemeral stowaways, from France to Canada over ninety years ago. My personal favourite is the paw print on the 8 August 1916 letter – Harry notes that a puppy has disrupted his letter writing and spoiled his page (Figures 2 and 3). The blemishes offer a rare moment of shared experience (or the closest that Harry and Gertie could hope to come to) because Harry describes how and why particular marks appear on his page (Figure 2). The material reminders of the extra-textual incident are inseparable from the relation of the event – be it a blot of grease from a slipped candle or the efforts of an enthusiastic canine – and are maintained in the archive. These traces of “ethnographic dirt” would be lost in the production of an edited volume of the Ralston letters. While they could be reproduced in photographs, something would be lost in the remediation between fragile pieces of paper with transparent grease spots and the digital reproduction of the pages. Leafing through the archive takes time and requires a bodily interaction with the material beyond clicking and scrolling on a computer screen. Reproducing war letters in a digital format opens the material to a wider audience, but the affective power of the archive does not easily transfer to the technological medium of the jpeg or the PDF. For me, part of the value of the Ralston Fonds is in their material presence, in the content they contain, and in the comprehensive and highly personal chronology of the Great War they describe. “Letters,” David Barton and Nigel Hall write, “are touched, held, smelled; they are stored away, hidden and destroyed.”³⁵ An aesthetics of sense memory comes into play when handling the Ralston letters.³⁶ The wonderful materiality of the pages, postcards, and newspaper clippings is a reminder that these objects found their way into the UBC Library’s collection through the particular actions of

³⁵ David Barton and Nigel Hall, *Letter Writing*, 8.

³⁶ Jill Bennett discusses the somatic experiences involved in the reception of artistic works that are influenced by traumatic experiences. In *Empathic Vision*, Bennett argues that this type of art affords an affective transaction that can compel a viewer towards social action. In the case of the Ralston Fonds, the transactive experience of being present with the letters, of touching those same pages that Harry composed and Gertie kept for so many years, requires a response. This letter to you is part of that response. See Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

Yes. I have the married bed that I was at Kamloops at home so so that he can come in once a week to see the old folk. He has a farm or rather a ranch about 12 miles from [unclear]

Figure 2. Harry Ralston to Gertrude Walker, 8 August 1916, somewhere in France, Henry Ralston Fonds, University of British Columbia Library Rare Books and Special Collections, Vancouver, Canada.

Our pup stepped on that last page. First she scares me by coming up behind me and taking a tug at my shirt deep enough to feel her teeth. Then she steps on my letter.

Figure 3. Harry Ralston to Gertrude Walker, 8 August 1916, somewhere in France, Henry Ralston Fonds, University of British Columbia Library Rare Books and Special Collections, Vancouver, Canada.

particular people. Having touched, held, and smelled the letters, I began to wonder about the transitive route that the letters had taken from the trenches of the Great War to their current location at a twenty-first century institutional archive.

BEYOND THE ARCHIVE: AFFECTIVE CONVERSATIONS

When I decided to research the Ralston letters, I met with Special Collections librarians Katherine Kalsbeek and George Brandak to learn more about the provenance of the collection. Now retired, George Brandak was eager to talk about his old friend Keith Ralston – the two were colleagues for many years at UBC – and George was certain

Keith would be willing to speak with me. George provided me with a phone number and wished me the best. My initial reaction to this was one of hesitation. A phone call is a lot of pressure; e-mail is so much easier as you can carefully craft what you want to say before hitting the send button. A phone call provides an immediate interaction with the speaker on the other end of the line. I worked up my courage and picked up the phone, speaking first with Keith's wife Mollie and then with Keith himself about the letters. They were nothing but kind, and generously agreed to speak with me. Part of the impetus for me to write this letter to you is an attempt to honour the time that Keith and Mollie spent with me and their willingness to share genealogical charts, photographs, newspaper clippings, and medals. Keith and Mollie will never read this letter. Keith died in the summer of 2009, Mollie late in 2011. I can ask them no more questions. I do not know what will become of their carefully documented family archives. I cannot make up for opportunities lost, but I can, hopefully, try to tell part of Keith and Mollie's archive story – a story that goes far beyond the limited information in the accession files.

Like Harry's biographical sketch and the general description of the fonds, there are few details about the donors Keith and Mollie Ralston in the accession records of the Ralston Fonds. The receipt for the Special Collections acquisition is a handwritten note that was initially used for the preliminary loan and evaluation of the material in 1992. This note describes the collection as consisting of 190 letters, sixty-two envelopes with stamps, six postcards, and six miscellaneous items. However, only one envelope is currently held with the collection at UBC. I lamented that these envelopes were separated from the letters because Special Collections decided not to acquire the envelopes: Keith and Mollie still had the covers.³⁷ The material that Keith and Mollie still had in their personal collection included hundreds of postcards sent from Europe, dozens of photographs, and more letters, including ones written by Gertie to Harry while he was waiting for demobilization after the war.

Reflecting on how and why Special Collections acquires material, I thought back to Ralph Stanton's comment during one of our graduate seminars. He said that his role as head of Special Collections was to "collect the collectors." While the Ralston collection was acquired before Ralph's tenure, I wonder about this designation of "collector," which I find difficult to apply to Keith and Mollie. "Collecting," in my mind, implies an active process of seeking out desired material or

³⁷ Mollie Ralston, interview by author, 22 March 2008, Vancouver.

supplementing one's existing holdings. Keith and Mollie never sought out the war letters or the family photographs and documents that were carefully stored in their Dunbar apartment; I would prefer to view the Ralstons as inheritors, or "keepers of the collection."

As I was reading through Jacques Derrida's analysis of the archive, *Archive Fever*, his etymological explanation of the term "archive" reminded me of my visit to the Ralstons. Derrida traces "archive" to the Greek "arkheion," a word that, originally, referred to the residence of a political figure, the "archon," who held power by virtue of the fact that the law, as it was recorded, was kept at his house. In describing the archons, Derrida writes: "[They] are first of all the document's guardians. They do not only ensure the physical security of what is deposited and of the substrate. They are also accorded the hermeneutic right and competence [to interpret their holdings]."³⁸ Keith Ralston was a historian by profession and continued to work on historical projects following his retirement from the history department at UBC. The lengthy genealogies that the Ralstons carefully created for both Harry and Gertie were some of the most valuable documents I encountered: these pages supply critical biographical information about Harry, Gertie, and family members mentioned in their letters. When I phoned to arrange our second meeting, I was particularly interested to know whether Keith had any photographs of his parents. By this time, I had already imagined what Harry and Gertie might be like, and I wondered if the photographs mentioned in their letters had survived. Looking through the photographs with Keith and Mollie provided a catalyst to begin talking about the lives of Harry and Gertie before and after the Great War.

The first image Keith handed me was a picture of Harry and Gertie on their wedding day, 6 October 1920 (Figure 4). The original photograph is approximately five centimetres by seven centimetres and badly overexposed. Despite the technical flaws of the photograph, I like to think there is a restrained hopefulness in the image. Both Harry and Gertie seem appropriately stoic for a union between a Presbyterian and a Methodist on the Canadian Prairie, pictured, as they are, at the Walker homestead in Antler, Saskatchewan. This photograph resonated with some of my contextual reading on memory and photography. In *Family Secrets*, Annette Kuhn writes about the role of family photographs in constructing personal and collective histories. "Personal photographs," she writes, "are commonly regarded as evidence that this or that event really happened, this or that person was actually present at a particular

³⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 2.



Figure 4. Gertie and Harry Ralston on their wedding day at the Walker homestead in Antler, Saskatchewan, 6 October 1920, Courtesy of the Ralston Family.

time and place: they seem in other words, to stand as guarantors of the past actuality of some person or event.³⁹ The images that Keith and Mollie showed me that day are now forever linked in my mind with the conversations I had engaged in for so long in Special Collections: Harry and Gertie were more than names, they were now faces and bodies, and people who looked back at me from photographs. At a basic level, the Ralston family photographs are important records that provide valuable context for the letters in Special Collections. However, photographs are much more than illustrations of a single story. Often, as Kuhn notes, photographs evoke “memories that might have little or nothing to do with what is actually in the picture.”⁴⁰ Harry’s letters held by Special Collections end abruptly in October 1918, and while I knew that he survived the war, the life that I had imagined for him after the conflict was quite different from the reality that his son remembered.

Keith told me several times that the war killed his father as surely as if he had been shot with a bullet. Harry’s dreams of becoming a

³⁹ Annette Kuhn, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* (New York: Verso, 2003), 153.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

minister never materialized; in the postwar world of Victoria, with mortgage payments and children to support, Harry became a delivery driver. Judging from his 1917 and 1918 letters, in which he describes his frustration with the war and his dreams of life in Canada following the conflict, the once optimistic and adventurous writing of his earlier letters is replaced by a melancholic and at times curt description of his future plans, which may or may not include Gertie. Keith's stories about his father reflect Keith's own history (Harry died when Keith was twenty-two years old). Harry's war stories were a great disappointment to a young son eager for a heroic tale: Harry's first role in the CEF was as a stretcher carrier, then a mess cook, a water carrier, and finally a librarian. He never met a German and likely never carried a gun into combat. However, from reading his letters, which include brief but sometimes expressive accounts of conflict and battle injuries, and from Keith's description of Harry, it is most likely that he suffered from what would now be diagnosed as post-traumatic stress disorder.

The fact that the letters survive today is a testament to personal and professional stubbornness. From the beginning Harry regards Gertie's letters to him as especially private. While still in England awaiting deployment, he told her that he boasted about her to his colleagues and displayed her picture, but "as to showing your letters I sure have never done that or don't intend to." Harry and Gertie cherished their letters, and each understood the emotional influence that their correspondence could have on the other. While many of Gertie's letters were destroyed owing to the precariousness of Harry's life in the military, the fonds do contain a letter that she wrote to a young man named Thomas Augustine, a family friend from her early life in Ontario who was living in British Columbia when he enlisted. In this letter, dated 1 April 1917, Gertie told him: "Yes, it's not pleasant riding in boxcars but cheer up! Things look so bright to us here – subs are subdued, news in Canada is good – we expect the end to come this summer." And: "We are all proud of you so smile! Smile! Smile! It is the only way." The letter resides in the collection because it was returned as undeliverable. Augustine took ill and was sent to convalesce in England, but he never recovered. He died on 21 May 1917. This epistle from Gertie reveals her in a way that Harry's letters to her cannot. While she cheers Augustine as best she can, she is not flippant. She describes her anticipation of being granted the right to vote and demands to know if there is anything she can send him, lamenting the limitations that her reduced salary places on sending larger care packages. Gertie kept her returned letter, letters

sent from Augustine's mother and sister, and the obituaries sent from his family's home in Riverdale, Ontario. Careful both with her prose and her papers, Gertie preserved a record of life in an extraordinary time.

In his 7 January 1918 letter, Harry asks Gertie: "[Would you do me a] favor by burning my letters to you from Jan 15th till say Sept 1st 17? I never want to see them again. And I want you to forget that you ever rec'd [*sic*] them." The nine months of 1917 correspondence that Harry wanted destroyed relate to what was probably his most difficult and traumatic period in France: a number of men in his company had been killed, his brothers had recently enlisted, providing an understandable new source of worry, and he had spent two weeks in hospital with what he calls "tonsillitis." I realize now that "tonsillitis" could refer to any number of maladies or injuries. Regardless of Harry's desires, Gertie kept the letters but wanted them destroyed after her death in 1964. The main reason the letters are held by UBC Special Collections has to do with Keith Ralston's relationship with the university. As a scholar and member of the history department, he made two other donations to Special Collections: the BC Fisheries Research Collection (which contains Ralston's research notes for a project on the province's salmon canneries) and the Ralston Family Fonds (which contains forty years of household documents and personal papers dating from the mid-1930s until the 1970s). Mollie made copies of the biographical documents that illustrate Harry's and Gertie's family trees for her children and reproduced photographs for her family members. Mollie, too, stressed the importance of donating her letters and documents to an institution that would value them and that had the financial stability to care for them properly. For now, the Ralston letters still with the Ralston family are waiting to be set in motion again by a new series of relationships that will determine their next archon – the next keeper of the collection.

EPISTOLARY REFLECTIONS

Coming to a close, but not yet a conclusion, I find myself imagining questions for you, the reader. I have tried to reveal aspects of what it was like for me to work with the Ralston letters. I do not know if I will ever be able to leave this project behind. I think about all of the Ralstons I have met – Harry and Gertie, Keith and Mollie – on a regular basis. Their authorial voices are quiet now, but mine still speaks, writes letters, puts ideas in motion, and shares words and experiences with others. A state of flux is inevitable. In "Re-sitting the Subject," Gerald MacLean

writes that, “in the case of the epistolary mode, the textual trace of the discoverable past – the ‘letter’ itself, we might say – is invariably caught and suspended while traveling from here to there, directed between different sites.”⁴¹ The Ralston letters had a long history of being “in transit” between different individuals before they reached their current destination at Special Collections. However, I can say with confidence that neither Harry nor Gertie ever imagined that their letters would belong to the UBC Library. Once a letter begins to travel, it becomes part of a complex web of associations between people, places, and historical eras. Tracing a letter’s travels and noting the different destinations it has journeyed through provide insight into a record’s provenance. However, if those travels and destinations – how the letter moves between people and places – go unrecognized, constructing a rich archive story can be challenging. The archivist at an institutional repository or, in the case of Special Collections, the library staff responsible for acquisition, must make some difficult decisions when tracing the journeys of the many items in their collection: they are charged with determining who might have created the records and how they might have been used. In the case of the Ralston letters, the two individuals who created the records died decades before the material was donated to Special Collections. Harry and Gertie’s authorial voices have long been quiet, but their epistolary relationship endures both in the content and in the materiality of their letters. The time and space that separates me from the actual writing of the letters affords me certain flexibility in interpretation. As Stephan Fuchs expresses it:

Authorial loss of control means increased discretion for readers. As a listener in a conversation, you cannot really avoid hearing that something is being said, you cannot really deny that the speakers are here, in the flesh, and you also have a harder time denying that things exist in the world around you ... [R]eading and writing introduce more abstractness and contingency into communication. There are increased possibilities for “misunderstanding” – that is, for interpreting a text in ways different from their authors and other readers. It is not just that readers may never encounter authors, but also that readers may never encounter each other.⁴²

⁴¹ Gerald MacLean, “Re-sitting the Subject,” in *Epistolary Histories: Letters, Fiction, Culture*, ed. Amanda Gilroy and W.M. Verhoeven (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000), 176.

⁴² Fuchs, *Against Essentialism*, 306.

I suppose it is plausible, if not probable, to find a way of identifying other readers of the Ralston letters by combing through borrowing records, though this would be inhibited by privacy protection, among other things. By writing to you now, I hope to make it possible for readers to come into contact with one another – if only tangentially, and only momentarily – as you pause to think about your own relationship with any letters in your possession.

Epistolary exchange does increase the potential for misunderstanding in that one is unable to promptly clarify or expand on a particular expression. Time and space are always implicated in the creation of epistolary missives. Whether we compose an e-mail on our hand-held wireless device or diligently send a carefully selected birthday card to a friend, we are relying on a material interface to carry our communicative intentions to another person. When I began this letter to you, I described it as an unfinished story. I hope that you might take elements of it to use in future communications, epistolary or otherwise, because conversations about our past inform how we think about our present and how we might act in our future. One of the immediate appeals for me when I began reading the Ralston letters was Harry's description of travelling through British Columbia; this journey was similar to ones I have been on, exploring the province I call home. I could easily envision Harry's trip eastward across the country. His letters took me to a place that I can only imagine – the Western Front of the Great War – and made it personal and deeply touching. The scholarly journeys that have developed since I began this project have led me into relationships that extend far beyond the academic community.

When the instructors of my graduate seminar, Dr. Patricia Badir and Dr. Siân Echard, encouraged me to pursue my interests in the Ralston Fonds and to tell my own archive story, I was concerned that it might not be appropriate to communicate my emotional connection to the material I was studying. To fully describe my research and why it matters to me on an emotional level I would have to describe those interactions with my instructors, Special Collections librarians, and, most important, Keith and Mollie Ralston. In thinking about the personal exchanges that have exponentially enhanced my research, I wanted to communicate my approach to, and some of the findings regarding, this ongoing project and to do so in a way that reflected on scholarly writing as a series of exchanges with people one meets – in person and on paper. These exchanges are never finished. While Harry and Gertie's wartime correspondence concluded nearly a century ago,

it is now situated within a number of networks – personal, archival, institutional, and scholastic. As an article in *BC Studies* this letter will ensure that information about the Ralstons will now be available online through academic databases. Though the letters are now in an institutional archive, their journey continues. Thank you for reading this letter, for sharing part of my research and archive stories. At the outset, I stated that the two of us – writer and reader – may have never met, but through the course of this letter I hope that we have begun an exchange. I look forward to the possibilities that might exist in future exchanges about the Ralston Fonds, epistolary memory, and reflective research that leads us into relationships with others.

Best Regards,
Megan