In August 1914 Maurice Masson had no choice but to abandon his academic post in Switzerland, return to France, and report for duty. As he made his way to the front he observed his compatriots, some young and enthusiastic, but many more sombre and heartsick. It seemed, he thought, as if ‘the better part of their hearts remain at home’. Masson was an exceptional man in many regards, not least his ability to complete a two-volume dissertation in the trenches. But in one important respect he resembled the unsophisticated rural soldiers who went to war while their hearts remained at home. He too was married. Conscription in France and across Europe guaranteed that married men would be a significant presence in all continental armies. In France, upwards of 50 per cent of all men in uniform were married, as were at least one-third (and quite probably more) of all German and Italian soldiers: in Bavaria, where German archival records are the most complete, married men accounted for more than half of all conscripts. At least 40 per cent of all men who served in the army of the Habsburg Empire were married. The military service of married men in Austria was so commonplace that ‘of the 25,616 Viennese men who had died in service between 1914 and 1918, about 70 per cent were married’. Even in Russia, where conscription reforms enacted in 1912 had

2 Colin Dyer, Population and Society in Twentieth-Century France (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1978), pp. 43–4. In France, 1.4 million soldiers died as a result of injuries sustained in the war; 630,000 women received widows’ pensions. This suggests that at least 45 per cent of all French soldiers were married. Given that the mortality rate was highest among the youngest military classes, an extrapolation based on mortality rates alone probably underestimates the number of married soldiers in the French army. For Germany, see Benjamin Ziemann, War Experiences in Rural Germany, 1914–1923, trans. Alex Skinner (Oxford: Berg, 2007), p. 36; for Italy, Francesca Lagorio, ‘Italian widows of the First World War’, in Frans Coetzee and Marilyn Shevin-Coetzee (eds.), Authority, Identity and the Social History of the Great War (Oxford: Bergahn Books, 1995), p. 195. On Austria, see Maureen Healy, Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire: Total War and Everyday Life in
exempted from military service ‘the only son or sole able-bodied male worker of a household’, married men still served in significant numbers: by 1916, 44 per cent of all peasant households in Moscow province had seen all their male workers – including, presumably, many married men – drafted into military service. Indeed, there were so many married men in the Russian army that their wives, dubbed soldatki, acquired a moral authority and political force of revolutionary consequence.

In Britain and its Dominions there was no conscription to compel men, married or single, to serve from the very beginning of the war, and the proportion of married men in the armed forces dropped accordingly. Although the state did not actively discourage married men from volunteering, the moral imperative to serve – so pressing and unambiguous for single men – was much more muted. A married man, it was well understood, had obligations to his family as legitimate and immediate as those to King and Country. Nonetheless, married men were by no means absent from the rolls of the British, Canadian, or (to a lesser degree) Australian forces. In Britain, where military service became compulsory only in 1916, married men were evident in the ranks from 1914 onwards – when more than half a million wives were in receipt of state-paid separation allowances – and in ever more substantial numbers as the war progressed: more than a million by July 1916 and in excess of 1.5 million by 1918. Married men in the far-flung settler colonies of the British Empire also bade farewell to their wives, parents and families and travelled great distances to defend the Empire. A sense of loyalty to the mother country, an economic downturn in 1913–14 that left many men in Canada looking for steady employment, and a desire to prove deserving of their wives’ esteem: all motivated married men in the Empire to enlist. In Canada, where conscription went into effect only in 1917 and ultimately sent few conscripts overseas, almost one-fourth of all men who served in the Canadian Expeditionary Force were married. By contrast, married men represented only 16 per cent of the men serving in World War I (Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 259 and 219, n. 24. Healy notes that the Dual Monarchy suffered 1,016,200 military deaths and cites estimates to the effect that probably 400,000 Austrian women were widowed during the war.


the Australian Imperial Force, which remained for the duration of the war untouched by conscription and was predominantly an army of young men.\(^6\)

It is clear, therefore, that the Great War was fought not only by the callow lads newly out of school whose post-war memoirs of alienation and anger towards civilian society have so powerfully influenced popular memory. Yet the married soldier of the Great War has all but disappeared from historical memory. His experiences, the connections he retained with home, and the unique anxieties he and his wife had to contend with as a married couple separated by combat remain under-examined facets of the war. By turning our attention to the experience of married couples in wartime, we can explore how husbands and wives worked to bridge the physical and existential gap that separated combatants from civilians; how the war prompted temporary (and sometimes permanent) changes in the character of married life; and how couples confronted, overcame and sometimes fell victim to the stresses associated with long-distance marriage and the anxieties of war.

To speak of ‘the couple’ is, of course, to oversimplify: every married soldier went to war with a kitbag of affections (and afflictions) unique to himself. Recently married couples, like Paul and Marie Pireaud, were in the first throes of infatuation.\(^7\) Other couples had been married for several years when war broke out. Masson had married in 1906 and he and his wife, the daughter of a prominent French scientist, remained united by their religious faith, their deep love, and an unwavering commitment to the life of the mind. Although many other marriages of long-standing had been tested by economic uncertainty and everyday disagreements, they too remained grounded in affection and empathy. Frank Maheux, who scraped together a living as a lumberjack in the backwoods of Quebec, enlisted in 1914 (without telling his wife), not to escape an unhappy family life but to provide a more regular income for his wife and five children. During eight years of married life George and Margaret Ormsby had also seen their share of economic insecurity and more than the occasional clash of two strong wills, but their marriage had been cemented by the births of two much-loved children. Herbert Oates, a skilled labourer from Leeds whose oldest child had been born ten years before the war, was


\(7\) The wartime correspondence of Paul and Marie Pireaud is now deposited in French military archives at Vincennes, Service historique de la Défense, iKt T458, ‘Correspondance entre le soldat Paul Pireaud et son épouse 10 jan. 1910–1926’. I have examined the Pireaud marriage in *Your Death Would Be Mine: Paul and Marie Pireaud in the Great War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).
not eager to enlist nor enamoured of military life when conscripted in 1916, but his misspelled letters reveal a great affection for his wife and four children. The more literate letters of Wilfrid Cove, a devoted family man who worked as a bank clerk in London, reveal a similarly happy home life.

These and many other couples whose wartime correspondence has survived were sustained by mutual affection; others, no doubt, welcomed wartime separation as a respite from a marriage marred by misery, mutual recrimination and physical abuse. It is not clear why the Viennese woman who murdered her husband, a military reservist, in 1915 did so, but the deed itself suggests something less than a happy marriage.8

If not all couples were happily married, some were not married at all. Few were of the distinguished social status of André Kahn, a French lawyer who scandalised his family by living with a divorcée, for common-law unions were more frequent in the urban working classes than in the ranks of the bourgeoisie. Nonetheless, the war brought to light many ‘irregular’ unions because military service forced the state to acknowledge, in ways that it had previously ignored, the legitimate needs and interests of common-law couples. It became customary for the state to provide separation allowances to the wives and families of men who enlisted, regardless of the legal status of their union. This was true in France, Germany and Italy, where conscription compelled men to leave their families to fend for themselves; and in Britain and Canada, where men were reluctant to volunteer if their families would be left in penury. In France, the state encouraged couples who had lived together before the war in a union libre to regularise their situation, if need be through a ‘marriage by proxy’: as Clémentine Vidal-Naquet has shown, a law introduced in 1915 that allowed couples to marry while the fiancé served at the front made it possible for engaged couples, whose weddings had been postponed by the outbreak of war, and common-law couples to marry and thus secure the pension benefits that would accrue to widows and orphans in the event of the soldier’s death.9

In Germany, unmarried mothers of children whose father died in the war could petition the state to be officially recognised as ‘Frau’ rather than ‘Fräulein’, thus freeing themselves and their children of the stigma of illegitimacy. Catherine Dollard has demonstrated that petitions of this sort were more likely to find a sympathetic reception during the war than in previous years, when the state had been reluctant to ‘reward’ women for their irregular

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unions. Nonetheless, official recognition of common-law unions was by no means uncontroversial: in 1917, the virtuous matrons of the Montreal Patriotic Fund objected to the disbursement of separation allowances to the unmarried ‘wives’ of soldiers serving in the Canadian Expeditionary Force. They feared that such provisions ‘cast a slur on the high estate of matrimony and on all legal wives, which slur is not to be borne without protest’.

Wives, legal and otherwise, looked on with trepidation as their menfolk departed for war. The challenges that confronted these young women were daunting; the questions that plagued them, dispiriting. How would the family support itself? Could the family business remain afloat? How would children be reared in a household lacking a father’s stern, but affectionate, presence? And when, if at all, would the couple be reunited? These questions – economic, familial and existential – dominated the daily thoughts of wartime couples and constituted the recurring themes of their correspondence. Letter-writing, the invisible thread that bound together the home front and the military front of every combatant nation, was an enterprise essential to the well-being of all wartime families: parents and sons, sisters and brothers, husbands and wives all maintained contact with one another through regular (and, in the case of many married couples, daily) correspondence. In the letters exchanged between husbands and wives we see an intense desire on the part of many (but not all) married soldiers to share with their wives descriptions of life at the front that paid attention to both the tedium of military life and its intermittent terror.

Beyond their desire to convey to their wives something meaningful about their existence in uniform, married soldiers also hoped that correspondence would allow them to remain connected to the humdrum realities of home life. As Jessica Meyer has observed of British soldiers, ‘men found spaces in which they could present themselves to their families not only as soldiers, through


12 Important and illuminating though these often deeply unsettling descriptions of combat were, the confessional urge that informed them was not unique to married men in uniform. As Michael Roper and Helen McCartney have demonstrated, single men too shared such accounts with their families. Helen B. McCartney, Citizen Soldiers: The Liverpool Territorials in the First World War (Cambridge University Press, 2005); Michael Roper, The Secret Battle: Emotional Survival in the Great War (Manchester University Press, 2009).
their descriptions of war experiences, but also as domestic men through their continuing involvement with domestic concerns'.

They worried about the financial well-being of their families and the health of their wives and children. They discussed educational plans for young children and medical prognoses for ailing infants. They fretted that their wives were being worn down by the exigencies of wartime life on the home front. And they thought about sex. Correspondence during the Great War thus constituted the means by which husbands and wives worked to maintain the essential elements of married life: economic support, emotional compassion and sexual intimacy.

The ideal was to write every day, and for British, French and German couples, who could usually count on a letter being delivered within three days, the regularity of correspondence and the (reasonable) reliability of delivery allowed them to establish in their daily exchanges a conversational tone that replicated, albeit imperfectly, the intimacy of pre-war married life. A shared commitment to write every day (or, in some instances, every other day) was not, however, always easy to honour. When soldiers found themselves in the heat of battle, when military postal stations were arbitrarily closed, when an imminent offensive cancelled all mail delivery, husbands were hard pressed to keep their promise of a letter every day. When infants were teething, when the often futile search for food occupied most of a woman’s waking hours (as became the reality in Germany and Austria in the last years of the war), when illness, fatigue and depression were ever present, wives, too, struggled to maintain the routine of daily correspondence. Husbands, fearful that they had been forgotten, occasionally took umbrage when their wives failed to write every day.

Couples from the colonies contended with these challenges and more. Mail was dispatched to Canada only twice a week and during the height of German submarine warfare ships sailing the Atlantic were always at risk. Under ideal circumstances, a letter sent from (or to) Canada would be delivered in two weeks, but circumstances were rarely ideal and it was usual for a letter to take three weeks or more to reach its destination. Thus Canadian couples never enjoyed the luxury of quick and conversational exchange. A soldier’s question posed in one letter – about the health of a sick child or the receipt of separation allowances – would not receive a reassuring answer for a month or more. And a wife’s anxiety about her husband’s very existence often persisted for

weeks on end: during the last stages of the Battle of the Somme, when Sgt Frank Maheux’s Canadian company suffered severe losses, his wife went for four weeks without word from him.¹⁵

That husbands and wives would write to each other regularly was a given. What they would write about, however, depended on their ability and willingness to ignore the strictures and intrusion of censorship; their capacity to describe honestly the circumstances, whether military or domestic, that confronted them; and the ease with which they could confide their most intimate desires. Married couples, like all wartime correspondents, had to come to terms with military censorship, and although its severity varied significantly by nation and within each army by rank, husbands and wives learned to adjust the content of their correspondence to suit or to evade the censors. For some married soldiers the presence of the censor offered a convenient excuse for not talking about the war. When Herbert Oates, a working man from Leeds whose phonetic spelling betrayed only a rudimentary education, arrived in France in November 1916, he warned his wife that his letters would always be read before being sent home: ‘has we have to post them open and they read them before they leave here so we cant put mutch in’.¹⁶ Other soldiers, uncomfortable with or unaccustomed to emotional expression, also found refuge in appeals to the intrusive presence of the censors. George Ormsby, who was more flirtatious than ardent in his letters home, excused his emotional reticence on the grounds that his letters had to be read by his commanding officer: ‘No doubt all my letters must seem cold and formal but you will understand that every letter has to be censored by own officers [sic] and of course one cannot be too loving under the circumstances.’¹⁷

Censorship was an annoyance, sometimes a convenient excuse, but rarely an absolute impediment to marital communication. This was evident both in the descriptions of combat that married men, often at the urging of their wives, sent home, and in their erotic musings: the censors, it seems, were no match for either Eros or Thanatos. In the French army, where censors reviewed only a random sample of the letters generated in any given regiment, men of all ranks systematically ignored the censors and scorned their

¹⁵ LAC, MG 30, E297, Frank Maheux correspondence. Frank Maheux to his wife Angeline, 24 October 1916.
¹⁶ Liddle Collection, Special Collections Library, University of Leeds (hereafter Liddle Collection), letters of Rifleman H. Oates, B Company, 3/8th Battalion, West Yorkshire Regiment. Herbert Oates to Beatie Oates, 3 November 1916.
¹⁷ Canadian War Museum Research Center, Ottawa, Canada, 58 A 1 153, letters of George Ormsby. George Ormsby to Maggie Ormsby, 1 June 1916.
intrusive presence. The most literate among them hoped that their letters, often supplemented with trench diaries sent home for safe-keeping, would make it possible for their wives to absorb, however vicariously, the sights, smells and sounds of the front. Henri Barbusse used his trench diary as an aide-memoire when writing his letters home, and subsequently when composing *Le feu*. Benjamin Simonet also kept a trench diary, which he hoped his children would read in later years to understand the nature of the war, while simultaneously sending his wife letters that hid little, if anything, of his anguish and increasing misery. He confessed that much though he would have liked to hide the worst of the war from her, it seemed ‘better that I can share with you as best I can my interior life. You are, thus, more unified with my existence and you understand better what we are suffering.’

Months before his death at Verdun, Maurice Masson invited his wife to join him, if only in her imagination, as he made his way through his trenches: ‘I would like during the peaceful hours of the night to take you with me on my rounds. I see you stopping with me near to the sentries. I think that you would be unable to speak to them but that you would have to hold yourself back from embracing them.’

The urge to describe the Western Front and render its alien landscape intelligible to women at home was not unique, however, to literary, educated Frenchmen. Like Paul Pireaud, a French peasant with perhaps six years of schooling who told his beloved Marie of craters at Verdun deep enough to hold fifteen horses, Wilfrid Cove described a battlefield in terms that would, he hoped, make sense to his suburban English wife. He wrote of water-logged shell craters ‘big enough to hold a couple of large motor omnibuses’.

A similar impulse prompted Lawrence Rogers, a struggling farmer from the Eastern Townships of Quebec. Married with two children when he enlisted in the Canadian Expeditionary Force in 1915, Rogers wanted to capture as best he could the visual reality of a front-line battlefield. In April 1917 he wrote: ‘Dear May . . . I wish you could see a modern battle field that is from a safe distance it is just one mass of holes large and small like mine craters . . . the trenches are all flattened out and dug outs blown in and it is amazing how quickly everything is cleared up the wounded sent out and the dead buried.’

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21 Canadian War Museum Research Center, letters of Lt Lawrence Rogers. Lawrence Rogers to his wife May, 27 April 1917.
Rendering in words the reality of the Western Front was, of course, an often grisly task, and many men were reluctant to burden their wives with its most unsettling scenes. Nonetheless, a kind of pained compassion often compelled them to write forthrightly about their life at the front. The omnipresence of death persuaded them of the need to prepare their wives for the possibility of their own death. As Simonet explained, he ‘hid nothing from [his wife]’ because he believed that ‘certainty is preferable to doubt’. And honesty, many wives insisted, was better than dissimulation. Several soldiers wrote more frankly than they thought prudent because their wives insisted upon it; Masson’s wife was by no means the only young woman who wanted to share a husband’s experiences ‘en toute vérité’. Masson complied (with some moments of hesitation), reminding his wife, ‘You must see that I tell you everything very exactly.’ Léa Mauny, a rural French schoolteacher, also wished to know precisely what her husband’s circumstances were: ‘I much prefer to be informed about everything that is happening to you. Danger must always be looked straight in the face. What do you do in the trenches, night and day?’ And Marie Pireaud urged Paul to tell her the unvarnished truth. Thus when his battery was engaged in fierce battle at Verdun, she wrote: ‘How your letters worry me how I weep each time that I read over these letters but listen I prefer to know the complete truth.’ His reservations notwithstanding, Paul justified a stark description of shell-fire’s gory effects by reminding Marie: ‘I know that you have always told me to tell you the truth.’

Haunted by the multitudinous horrors of war many a soldier focused on one omnipresent image: the ubiquitous, unsettling presence of countless unburied bodies. In mid March 1915, while serving in the Champagne region, Simonet noted:

We are walking on top of dead bodies, parapets have been made out of cadavers on which we rest; and in front of the parapets, just as in the surrounding fields, there are piles of dead bodies. I wonder how, when the first sunny days arrive, we will be able to live and breathe. I’m sure that epidemics will force us and them to abandon these charnel houses.

22 Simonet, Franchise militaire, p. 56. Letter dated 19 October 1914.
Masson confided that the front-line trench that his company occupied in June 1915 was ‘nothing but a charnel house, where the walls, the parapets, and the battlements are formed with human flesh. One can still see, here and there, a pitiful foot sticking out, a back smoothed out in a section of the wall.’ Perhaps only a poetic French soldier would think, as Masson did, of the Western Front as a ‘vineyard of death’, but British and Canadian soldiers were also awe by the macabre architecture of the front lines. Neither Rowland Feilding nor Agar Adamson, battalion commanders in British and Canadian regiments, respectively, had the literary skill that made Masson’s letters so memorable, but they too shared with their wives unnerving accounts of the war’s brutal effects. Like Masson, Feilding observed that ‘the fire-trench itself is more or less a graveyard. In one part, particularly, it is lined with tin discs with numbers on them, indicating where soldiers have been buried in the parapet; and, wherever you dig, you are liable to come upon these poor remains. It is not even necessary to dig, for they outcrop in places.’

Adamson, who in 1917 commanded the Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry regiment, was equally forthcoming in his letters to his wife. He wrote of the stinging, rasping effects of gas shells, of shell-shocked soldiers physically restrained by their comrades, of body parts extruding from the walls of trenches, and of men obliterated by shell-fire: ‘One unlucky shell hit a dug out last night (5 p.m.) blowing to pieces four of our most valuable snipers. We could not find enough of those poor fellows to put in a handkerchief.’

As commanding officers, Feilding and Adamson were at greater liberty to write about the most awful aspects of the war. Censorship compelled enlisted men in the Canadian and British Expeditionary Forces to be more circumspect, or so they believed. There were, however, occasions that compelled honest communication, the censors’ close scrutiny notwithstanding.

For the men of the CEF the Battle of Mount Sorrel was one such occasion. The battle opened on 2 June 1916 with an intensity that stunned even the most hardened front-line veterans. The usually taciturn George Ormsby wrote of its relentless barrage, and Lawrence Rogers, recuperating in London, confessed that he felt lucky to have emerged unscathed:

Thank God I came through with a whole skin, but there was a time when I did not think there would be one man left... The ground just shook like a jelly and the explosions were so heavy at times that I was lifted right off the ground... I went into the front line with 75 men and two officers and there was only one officer and twelve of us left to march out, of course they were not all killed some were wounded some shell shocked.30

But Rogers’s description of Mount Sorrel pales in comparison with that of Frank Maheux, whose written English was inflected with the syntax and phonetic accent of French Canada:

it is a fright, it is like a butchery, my dear wife, it is not war, their no name for it, the night before I was defending a Bridge with 5 mens, the Germans throw us 10 or 11 big trench mortars killed 3 of my camarades, and wounded another one on the leg... and the worse dear wife it was all them corpses around us, and we could’n beried them on a/c [sic] the Germans had killed every one of us... they was hands feets mens cut in pieces, by them big trench mortars... I see poor fellows legs cut off, trying to pull themselves to some place of shelter against the shells, but only to die I saw to much Angelique.31

How Angelique Maheux must have trembled as she read these words and reflected on the horrors her husband confronted ‘somewhere in Belgium’.

Letters such as these drew soldiers’ wives closer to the front by allowing them to imagine both the routines and real dangers of military life. But insofar as wartime correspondence also offered front-line soldiers the opportunity to occupy (at least imaginatively) their customary place at home, it also helped them preserve in many ways their civilian identities as husbands, fathers, and lovers. Fathers could, and did, visualise their children at play or struggling with homework, their babies convulsed with colic or sweetly sleeping. Husbands could, and did, follow in their mind’s eye their wives as they occupied themselves with the familiar tasks of domestic life. Often these thoughts were profoundly comforting: when Benjamin Simonet wrote home, he thought of himself as being physically removed from the hellish conditions that surrounded him at the front and ‘in full communion’ with his wife and four children in the south of France.32 Alois Deuringer, a German peasent, confided to his wife: ‘My
thoughts are always with you my dear ones. While being on guard during the night I think of you being safe at home, during the day I think of you working."33

Life on the home front was not always idyllic, however, and as the war dragged on and economic conditions deteriorated, noticeably for all combatant nations and disastrously in Russia, Germany and Austria-Hungary, anxieties about the well-being of families at home intensified.

Married couples struggled, with varying degrees of success, to address the economic challenges wrought by insufficient manpower, inflation and food shortages. Conditions were especially dire in Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Maureen Healy describes the desperate plight of an Austrian war widow who in 1917 threatened to kill herself and her two children because she could no longer put enough food on the table to support them.34 And Tara Zahra writes of a young Czech girl who begged her father to desert: ‘We are here alone without our father, and perhaps we will soon be without a mother as well, as our mother doesn’t want to and cannot support us . . . Every day she goes without breakfast, and at lunch we have only black coffee. At night she comes home totally exhausted and cries from hunger, and we cry with her.’35 A similarly afflicted peasant woman in a small German village complained to her husband: ‘They take the breadwinner away from the children and let them starve to death, they are crying for bread the whole day long . . . I have to stand in the street all day long and wait for hours until I get a few things to eat.’36 Even affluent war wives who sent servants to procure their meals at the communal kitchens that emerged in the last years of the war suffered economic strain. Christl Wolf, a recent bride and new mother, was accustomed to a comfortable bourgeois life in Vienna. By January 1918, however, she too was feeling the bitter pinch of chronic food shortages. As she lamented in a letter to her husband: ‘as far as the government is concerned we could all starve to death. I am really very angry at this whole soldiers’ economy . . . You haven’t been able to get meat in Vienna for you with my eyes. I forgot the rain, the cold, and the sadness of the evening in these half-destroyed villages that are so pitiful to see.’ Henri Barbusse, *Lettres à sa femme, 1914–1917* (Paris: Ernest Flammarion, 1937). Letters dated 24 May 1915 and 14 January 1915.

a fortnight, except surreptitiously, of course. Letters of this type were so common in Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire that the authorities disparaged them as *Jammerbriefe* (moaning letters).

The Western Allied nations were less oppressed by economic misery than Germany, Austria and Russia. Prices increased, but not prohibitively; food grew scarce, but starvation never threatened families in Britain, France or Canada as it did in Germany and Austria. Nonetheless, economic stress bore down on husbands and wives, punctuating their correspondence with oft-repeated laments. Whether affluent or impoverished, the front-line soldier feared that the war was forcing his wife and children to confront a future of penury. Separation allowances certainly helped to ease the financial hardship caused by a husband’s absence, but bureaucratic red tape often delayed payments, infuriating men like Frank Maheux who had enlisted in the hope of securing his family’s well-being. His one persistent hope was that Angeline would have a bountiful potato crop, adequate each year to see the family through the hard Canadian winter. He was not the only man of modest circumstances to fret about his family’s food supply. From the time he arrived in France, Herbert Oates worried about how Beatie would cope: he heard that ‘flower as gone up again well I do not now what price it is going to be before this war is over but I hope it will not be long’. By Christmas 1916 he confessed: ‘you ask me if I get enough to eat well sometimes we do and sometimes we don’t but we have to make the best of it. so long as you and Mannie and Lads get enough . . .’ He was so concerned about the family’s finances that he implored Beatie ‘to see about Willie leaving School then Arthur might get Willie job then you will be all right’.

The Cove family was more comfortably situated than Beatie Oates and her boys. But middle-class respectability required that Ethel keep an attentive eye on the bank balance. She reassured Wilfrid that she was doing her best to ‘keep the right side of the ledger’ but recognised that she could not afford to be extravagant. In a nation where in 1914 the average labourer had earned approximately £1 a week, the Coves were far from indigent, but their definition of affluence was modest indeed. Ethel reported that ‘There seemed such a lot in the Bank blce. £18 odd (Feb 1)! It seemed such wealth. But it’s

Hämmerle, ‘You let a weeping woman call you home?’, p. 171.
dwindled now to £3 odd after paying rates etc. But it will soon pick up again.  

She was, however, a woman of generous instincts who insisted on sending Wilfrid packages filled with toothpaste, condensed milk and home-made sausage rolls, and helping her mother buy coal in the unusually cold winter of 1916–17: ‘Had an unhappy letter from Mum yesterday ... Mum can’t keep warm (her hands are bad) and Poppy buys coal by the 1d or 2d worth. Would we girls give 6d weekly I’ve sent Mum 2/6 as it’s dreadful to think of one of your own hungry and cold this weather.’

What would Ethel Cove have made of Mary Corfield, who in 1917 contemplated taking a paying job because it seemed impossible to live on less than £400 a year? Such affluence was well beyond her ken. Yet Mary Corfield, like other women of the English upper-middle class also felt the pinch of wartime austerity, and money woes made for many a fraught exchange with her husband. In December 1915, Corfield offered advice on how Mary should make ends meet: ‘I should pay your dress maker the nurse and the rent as soon as poss [sic]: and then pay Mrs. L at Xmas out of Mother’s allowance. I enclose two small cheques which will pay the rent. Surely your list is practically all the bills we have ... The coal and gas can wait till next month.’

Whatever economies Mary was able to make were only temporary, for a year later she and her husband were once again at loggerheads over the family budget. Having contemplated the dreary prospect of making do on only £350 per year, and having urged Mary to see what she could do to ‘save a bit’, Corfield concluded: ‘Well enough of this topic we discuss it so often it only makes us miserable and never has the slightest result.’

Money problems were not the only subject of anxiety. Married men knew that their wives were often overworked. Paul Pireaud feared that when Marie was in the last months of her pregnancy she ran the risk of a premature delivery because she, like many peasant women across Europe, had to work long hours in the fields. Frank Maheux was outraged that Angeline had no help from the men in their small town when it came time to chop the winter wood supply. And George Ormsby urged Maggie to give up the ranch they owned in the interior of British Columbia because it was too much for her

40 Liddle Collection, letters of Gunner W. J. Cove, Royal Garrison Artillery. Ethel Cove to Wilfrid Cove, 7 February 1917.
41 Ibid., Ethel Cove to Wilfrid Cove, 31 January 1917.
42 Liddle Collection, letters of Capt. Frederick Alleyne Corfield to his wife, Mary Corfield. Frederick Corfield to Mary Corfield, 2 December 1915.
43 Ibid., 1 October 1916.
to manage on her own. To ease the burdens of overwork and oppressive anxiety that beset married women on the home front, their husbands encouraged them to move in with parents, in-laws or other war wives. It is clear that these arrangements, although sometimes fraught with the usual tensions of a multi-generational household, offered a war wife real benefits. Childcare and domestic chores could be shared, finances pooled, and loneliness eased. Maggie Ormsby abandoned the ranch, moved to the nearest town of appreciable size and shared a house with another war wife. In the winter she relocated with her two children to Vancouver where she lived with her parents. May Rogers found herself in a similar situation in rural Quebec. She spent the winter of 1915–16 on the farm (with another woman sharing the house for company) and then moved in the fall of 1916 to Montreal, where she would be closer to but not under the same roof as her rather overbearing father. Lawrence Rogers, having just survived the final stages of the Battle of the Somme, was relieved to know that his wife and children would be well cared-for during the coming winter, but he feared for the safety of his small-town children: 'Have the children any car tracks to cross on their way to school? I hope not as I am terribly afraid of street cars.'

War wives did not need to face the rigours of a Canadian winter to appreciate the advantages of a blended household. Many women in France also moved home or temporarily shared quarters with their in-laws or parents. As Peggy Bette has discovered, one-third of the war widows in Lyon whose cases she has examined had moved during the war to live with parents, siblings or in-laws. Some women went far afield, like the pregnant Mme Bonneaud who relocated from Lyon to the family home in Brest; others moved only a few streets away. Beatie Oates decided, and her husband agreed, that however crowded the family home would be when occupied by four children and three adults it was to everyone’s advantage to have her parents live with them. Many of these arrangements were satisfactory. Some were tense and difficult. By 1917, Mary Corfield and her two children were

45 Canadian War Museum Research Center, letters of Lt Lawrence Rogers. Lawrence Rogers to May Rogers, 5 October 1916.
47 Liddle Collection, letters of Rifleman H. Oates. Letter no. 25 [winter 1916–17].
living with her mother and sisters, who seemed to treat her like a maid servant.

Although Frederick Corfield wished that Mary could be a better manager of the household budget, there was one economy he would not countenance. When he came home on leave, he expected Mary to meet him in London where they would spend a day or two at a suitably refined hotel. Leave was no time for penny-pinching. In fact, leave was an occasion so central to the married soldier’s wartime service that it figured in the correspondence of soldiers of all ranks and nations. In Germany, the Prussian War Ministry noted as early as October 1915 how eager married men were to return home for a leave that would give them physical rest and a much desired reunion with their loved ones. French troops longed for leave with such a passion that the military censors could not help but take notice; and in 1917, when indiscipline swept the French ranks, the implementation of a more liberal (and more fairly administered) leave roster was central to the soldiers’ demands. By contrast, married men in the Canadian Expeditionary Force found the promise of leave a source of constant frustration. Because few were eligible for home leave even on compassionate grounds, Canadian soldiers took their leave in Britain or behind the lines in France. This had its attractions, of course, for the Canadian soldiers who had relations in Blighty, or for the hard-drinking and womanising men who enjoyed themselves so lustily in Paris that subsequent leaves there were temporarily suspended. But what married Canadian soldiers really wanted and almost never enjoyed was a leave that would allow them to go home. George Ormsby probably spoke for many of his companions when he said: ‘With us Canadians England is not home, simply a make-shift and although people are very kind and nice yet it is different to home.’

Leave held out many promises. It offered rest to the overly tired and respite from the relentless noise of the guns. Mathieu Escande, a rural conscript from the south-west of France, noted in his journal that it could refresh the soul. In 1917 leave allowed him a brief escape from the ‘métier militaire’ and he

48 Liddle Collection, letters of Frederick Alleyn Corfield. Frederick Corfield to Mary Corfield, 26 January 1917, 15 February 1917.
49 Ulrich and Ziemann, German Soldiers in the Great War, p. 117.
51 Agar Adamson noted in July 1917 that: ‘All leave to Paris has been called off I understand on account of some men of the Canadian Regiments behaving disgracefully and also contracting disease.’ LAC, MG 30 E 149, letters of Agar Adamson. Agar Adamson to his wife, Mabel, 7 July 1917.
returned to service rejuvenated by contact with his family: ‘I leave happy to
have seen my family and especially to have left them in good health.’53 Others,
however, were struck by the bittersweet quality of leave. Reunion filled
them with joy; departure left them despondent. For Paul Pireaud it was
always heart-breaking to bid farewell to his family and return to the horrors
and hardships of life in uniform. While at home he had worked in the fields,
taken his son on walks down country lanes, and made love to his wife. Sexual
reunion was, not surprisingly, the most ardently anticipated aspect of home
leave and, more surprisingly, a topic of frequent discussion in the wartime
correspondence of husbands and wives. French soldiers and their wives resented
the introduction of more rigorous censorship in late 1916 because it exposed
their most intimate secrets to the prurient gaze of strangers. But censorship did
not stop the conversation: French soldiers and their wives ignored the censors
and continued to write about the anticipated joys of leave.54 British soldiers,
whose letters were read by junior officers in their own company, were more
reticent and did not write explicitly about what they really expected to do
while home on leave. Not so for their commanding officers whose unpublished
correspondence is noteworthy for its often intense, undisguised and erotic
passion.

Hugh Rawson had wooed his beguiling Mary from afar, gradually over-
coming her parents’ objections to a wartime engagement and marriage. His
letters from 1915 to their marriage in 1917 reveal an unapologetic longing to be
with her. Mary, in turn, reciprocated his passion in letters that often left him
emotionally fulfilled and erotically aroused. In October 1915 he confessed:
‘You mustn’t talk about kissing in your letters as I really can’t sleep after it,
think of you all the time.’55 Six months later, he teasingly upbraided her again:
‘I am afraid you are becoming a very naughty little girl, your last letter really
made me want you very badly.’56 And so it continued through the autumn
of 1916, by which time he had resolved that they should ‘get married on the
quiet. I don’t feel like having leave and then coming out again without you
belonging to me entirely.’57 Married in 1917, their honeymoon seemed entirely
satisfactory, even though the morning sickness that quickly followed was

53 Archives Départementales de la Charente, Br8435, Jean Escande, Le journal de Mathieu: la guerre de 14 vécue par un charpentier de Labruguière, sapeur au 2ème génie (Castres: self-published, 1986).
54 I develop this argument in more detail in Your Death Would be Mine, pp. 190–2.
55 Liddle Collection, letters of Philip Hugh Rawson. Hugh Rawson to Mary Furnival, 30 October 1915.
56 Ibid., 8 March 1916. 57 Ibid., 6 October 1916.
more than a little irksome and the physical separation that war required even more so. Hugh hoped that fresh air and exercise would help his bride feel better; he could not recommend anything to take the edge off marital loneliness: ‘You can’t hate sleeping alone more than I do, but isn’t awful [sic] having no one to cuddle . . . Well darling I do miss you terribly and get so fed up and short tempered over things, am afraid other people get it in the neck occasionally on your account.’

The sexual excitement evident in the correspondence of Mary and Hugh Rawson was not the exclusive privilege of newlyweds. Frederick and Mary Corfield had married in 1907 and both marked their thirtieth birthdays in the first year of the war. In their own minds they were well past the first flush of youth. And yet they were pleasantly surprised to discover that passion persisted. Indeed, sexual fantasy, combined with sexual frustration, punctuated their correspondence for the duration of the war. Always calculating when his next leave would come due, he and Mary (like Paul and Marie Pireaud) devoted considerable time to determining when her period (referred to obliquely as ‘the Captain’ and sometimes as the ‘sergeant’) was likely to interfere with such plans. In August 1917, Corfield observed:

So you have been thinking a good bit of your man again at nights Darling, I read your letter in bed last night and when I got to the last sentence it made something begin to move and want! What a pity we can’t always be together, I love to think you do like loving, I often used to think you didn’t and only tried to please me, but now I know differently and it will stop many little squabbles and disappointments which lead to unhappiness, I just want my woman always.

If enforced and prolonged absence provoked sexual frustration, did it also give rise to sexual infidelity? This, of course, emerged as a recurring theme in war literature, exemplified by the bitter tale of betrayal central to the closing chapters of Roland Dorgelès’s Les croix de bois. Sulphart, having survived the war, received a letter from his concierge, alerting him to the fact that ‘his wife had gone off with a Belgian, taking all the furniture with her.’ The unfaithful wife – a gendered symbol of civilian indifference to and betrayal of the frontline soldier – certainly did exist. Few saw their (alleged) infidelity become the stuff of headlines and national chatter, as was the case in September 1917 when

58 Ibid., 23 June 1917.
59 Liddle Collection, letters of Frederick Alleyn Corfield. Frederick Corfield to Mary Corfield, 11 July 1916.
60 Ibid., 10 August 1917.
Lt Douglas Malcolm stood trial at the Old Bailey for having killed the odious foreigner who had threatened the honour of his young, lovely (and, one suspects, desperately unhappy) English wife. In a much-talked-about trial Malcolm secured the sympathy of the British newspaper-reading public and acquittal at the hands of an equally sympathetic jury of his peers. Malcolm believed, against all odds, in the innocence of his wife; Hamilton Gault, by contrast, suspected the worst of his once beloved wife. Fearing that she was having an affair with a fellow officer, Gault sued for legal separation. Marguerite counter-sued, and left the Montreal courtroom with a support order that gave her $1,400 a month and $5,000 in court costs. Without doubt, some couples suffered the strains of war in most unfortunate ways.

The infidelity of wives was deemed a grave moral offence against husbands risking life and limb on the front lines and, more generally, against the nation itself. Because women who betrayed their husbands were judged undeserving of the separation allowances provided to war wives, the state took pains to investigate charges of wifely infidelity. Susan Pedersen has demonstrated that this was a task the British government did not shirk: between 1916 (when the state took over responsibility for the payment of separation allowances) and 1920 it investigated 41,836 cases of alleged misconduct. Only 13,418 women (less than 1 per cent of all women in receipt of separation allowances) were struck from the rolls. Some war wives did betray their husbands, as residents of small-town Ontario, rural France, and southern Germany could (and did) attest, but female infidelity was not as endemic as social commentators fearing the end of civilisation as they knew it contended. And if husbands worried about what their wives were up to in their absence, wives had their own moments of apprehension too. When May Rogers feared that her husband might have sought ‘consolation while in Rest Billets’, he assured her ‘I am not afraid to tell you anything I have done so far.’

62 The Times covered the Malcolm case in a series of articles: on 27 August 1917 it noted that Malcolm had been arrested; between 6 September and 11 September it reported testimony presented at Malcolm’s trial, and on 12 September 1917 it covered his acquittal, which it deemed a ‘popular verdict’.

63 LAC, MG 30 E149: the letters of Agar Adamson includes a press clipping from the [Montreal] Gazette, dated 19 March 1917, concerning the Hamilton Gault divorce case. Gault was one of the wealthiest men in Canada, with an estimated fortune of $1,300,000 and an annual income of between $60,000 and 70,000.

64 Pedersen, ‘Gender, welfare, and citizenship in Britain during the Great War’, p. 999.

65 Morton, Fight or Pay, p. 162; Hanna, Your Death Would be Mine, p. 267; Escande, Le journal de Mathieu, p. 49; Ziemann, War Experiences in Rural Germany, p. 123.

66 Canadian War Museum Research Center, letters of Lt Lawrence Rogers. Lawrence Rogers to May Rogers, 21 August 1917.
any interest in comely Italian girls. These men, and others in uniform, could not say the same, however, for some of their colleagues.

Perhaps few soldiers were as devoted to the principle of marriage — if not the practice of monogamy — as Douglas Palmer, a corporal who bade farewell to his wife in Canada, wed another in Scotland and, rumour had it, a third in England. His wife, who knew nothing of these marital adventures until Palmer returned to Canada accompanied by his Scottish wife, considered herself ‘cruelly wronged’. Other wives might have learned of their husbands’ indiscretions in a more direct manner: when a soldier in the British or Canadian Expeditionary Forces contracted a venereal disease and had to seek treatment in a military hospital he forfeited his family’s right to a separation allowance for the duration of his hospitalisation. Nonetheless it is as difficult to determine how many married men engaged in extra-marital sexual activity during the war as to know with any certainty how many of their wives did so. Gossip and inflammatory press reports about the prevalence of venereal disease in the ranks suggested national epidemics of infidelity. The dramatic and tragic denouements of some transgressions did so too: one British major, learning that his wife had been informed that he had contracted a venereal disease, chose to commit suicide rather than return home. Yet rates of venereal infection, a serious concern for military commanders determined to keep men healthy enough to serve (and die) in the front lines, suggest that the most apocalyptic estimates of imminent venereal disaster were vastly overblown. Jean-Yves LeNaour notes that approximately 8 per cent of all French soldiers serving between 1916 and 1919 were treated for a venereal infection. Infection rates were considerably higher among Dominion troops, who spent the duration of the war far from home. The Australians and New Zealanders were the most seriously afflicted, with infection rates of 18 per cent; the Canadians were not much more restrained. Tim Cook notes that:

Canadians had one of the highest venereal disease rates in all the BEF. At the epidemic’s most troubling point, 28.7 per cent of the men were reported to be infected; by the end of the war, some 15.8 per cent of overseas enlisted men

had contracted some form of venereal disease, and this remained almost six times the figure of that experienced by British troops.\(^\text{70}\)

Statistics of this type offer only a rough indication of married soldiers’ infidelity: not all sexual encounters would have resulted in venereal infections and not all of the afflicted were married. Single men, after all, were as susceptible to infection as married men. Indeed, some historians believe that sexually inexperienced single men were more likely than their married comrades to avail themselves of the services of prostitutes. This argument might explain the higher rates of infection in the Australian and New Zealand ranks, where young bachelors far outnumbered married men. By contrast, Clare Makepeace argues that in the British Expeditionary Force ‘brothel visits for married men were more acceptable’ than for single men because married men were more accustomed to regular sexual activity.\(^\text{71}\) But in the absence of definitive evidence, it is impossible to know how many married men in uniform strayed from their marriage vows. Wives certainly worried that they might be so tempted, just as some husbands harboured similar anxieties about their wives. Fears of infidelity could be allayed by reassuring words – Frank Maheux assured Angeline that ‘I always love you and I love you to the last’\(^\text{72}\) – but words and good intentions were not enough to prevent him from subsequently contracting gonorrhea.\(^\text{73}\)

Lawrence Rogers was surely correct when he observed: ‘a husband or a wife thousands of miles away is no fun’.\(^\text{74}\) Wartime marriage was fraught with the frustration of physical separation, the intensification of economic hardship and fears of infidelity. These obstacles notwithstanding, husbands and wives laboured with varying degrees of success to sustain the affection of their marriages, the welfare of their families and the companionship that comforted them in their bleakest moments. However imperfect their letter-writing skills,

\(^{70}\) Antje Kampf, ‘Controlling male sexuality: combating venereal disease in the New Zealand military during two World Wars’, Journal of the History of Sexuality, 17:2 (2008), p. 239, n. 16. Although Kampf cites figures to the effect that 10 per cent of all Canadian troops contracted a venereal infection during the war, Desmond Morton and Tim Cook both believe that the infection rate was at least 16 per cent: Morton, Fight or Pay, p. 162; Tim Cook, Shock Troops: Canadians Fighting the Great War, 1917–1918, vol. ii (Toronto: Viking Canada, 2008), p. 176.

\(^{71}\) Makepeace, ‘Male heterosexuality and prostitution during the Great War’, p. 70.

\(^{72}\) LAC, MG 30 E297, Frank Maheux correspondence. Frank Maheux to Angeline Maheux, 11 January 1917.


\(^{74}\) Canadian War Museum Research Center, letters of Lt Lawrence Rogers. Lawrence Rogers to May Rogers, 21 August 1917.
they cultivated their marriages by correspondence. Letters conveyed to the home front more of the horrors of combat than we once believed: wives did not know in a visceral, immediate way what it was to serve on the Western Front, but most wives knew that it was pretty damned awful. Regular correspondence also allowed husbands to remain connected to their domestic lives: they fretted about the well-being of their children, the financial security of their households and the affection of their wives. Most endured the hardships of combat, enforced separation and relentless anxiety about the well-being of their loved ones in the hope of reunion.

For countless couples – including Lawrence and May Rogers – this hope was never realised. The Great War made widows of at least 2 million women: more than 600,000 in France and almost as many in Germany; 400,000 in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, 239,000 in Britain and approximately 200,000 in Italy. In Canada, a nation of fewer than 8 million citizens, more than 10,000 women lost their husbands in the war. Widows had to confront the challenges of single-parenthood, the oppressive burden of grief and economic insecurity. Karin Hausen reveals the dire plight of many German war widows whose pensions, even before the inflationary crises of the post-war years, were rarely sufficient to replace the income of their lost husbands. Not every war widow suffered as grievously as the German woman whose monthly income plummeted from more than 300 marks before the war to a meager 47.33 marks after her husband’s death, but genteel (and not so genteel) impoverishment was the sorry lot of many war widows.

Peggy Bette’s study of war widows in Lyon reminds us that some war widows avoided economic disaster by successfully assuming responsibility for their family business. Others – one-third or more in France and Germany – remarried.

75 For France, see Dyer, Population and Society in Twentieth-Century France, pp. 43–4; for Britain, Pedersen, ‘Gender, welfare and citizenship in Britain during the Great War’, p. 1005. In 1924 the Weimar Republic authorised the allocation of pensions to 371,795 German war widows. However, Karin Hausen estimates that ‘the total number of women widowed by the war must have been about 600,000, but by 1924 approximately one-third of them had apparently remarried and had become ineligible for widows’ pensions’. Karin Hausen, ‘The German nation’s obligations to the heroes’ widows’, in Margaret Randolph Higonnet et al., Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 128. On Italy, see Lagorio, ‘Italian war widows’, p. 195, n. 16. On Canada, see Morton, Fight or Pay, p. 228.

76 Hausen, ‘The German nation’s obligations to the heroes’ widows’, pp. 139, 137.

Couples who reunited in 1919 sometimes found that the dreams of marital harmony that had sustained them through the war years dissipated in the stark light of everyday life. Divorce, legal separation or simple abandonment followed, at least for some. Marked increases in the incidence of divorce and separation caused much agonised social commentary and the French (who were particularly agitated by the elevated divorce rate in Paris) were not alone in believing that the war had created a ‘crise de mariage’.\(^78\) In Canada, as in Britain, filing a divorce petition was expensive, yet the number of couples seeking to dissolve their marriages increased dramatically after the war: from an average of 40 per year in Canada to 500 per year between 1920 and 1924; in England and Wales the increase was more modest – from an annual average of 919 before the war to 3,150 in the immediate post-war period – but disconcerting nonetheless. Couples who could not afford the legal costs of a divorce petition could seek a separation order through a magistrate’s court, and here too the numbers increased, but not exponentially: from an average of 10,765 each year immediately before the war to 13,603 in the early 1920s.\(^79\) In Germany, the divorce rate more than doubled, from 15,633 divorces per year immediately prior to the war to 39,216 in 1921. The German evidence suggests, moreover, that hastily concluded wartime marriages, where young couples only realised their radical incompatibility after the war, were the most fragile.\(^80\) The moral panic that characterised discussions of divorce and marital disintegration in the post-war era nonetheless overstated the severity of the problem. Each of the major combatant nations had mobilised well over a million married men. Most returned home, were reunited with their wives and families, and remained married.


\(^{80}\) Bessel, \textit{Germany after the First World War}, p. 232.