

The Wartime Letters of Leslie & Cecil Frost, 1915-1919 Edited by R.B. Fleming

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The Wartime Letters of Leslie & Cecil Frost, 1915-1919

Edited by R.B. Fleming. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007. xxxvi + 379 pp. \$38.95 hardcover. ISBN 1-55458-000-5. <www.wlupress.wlu.ca>

Leslie and Cecil Frost were two of over 630,000 Canadians who enlisted in the Great War. Canada's war raged from 4 August 1914 to 11 November 1918, resulting in the death of over 60,000 Canadians and wounding another 172,000. Leslie Frost wrote towards the end of 1917 that his experiences in the trenches were hard to recount, and that he'd "just as soon talk about them when I get home and forget them when I am here." But he could not push the war from his mind during the fighting, or throughout his life.

This collection of their letters documents the war experience of the Frost brothers from Orillia, Ontario, and their service for King, Empire and country. We encounter the war through their eyes, as captured in their diligent letters home. Editor R.B. Fleming has done a thorough job in providing a detailed introduction to the Frost family, prewar Ontario, temperance issues and rural politics, all with the successful goal of putting the Frost family within the context of early twentieth-century Canada. While the introduction feels a little indulgent at sixty-one pages, Fleming makes up for this long march by providing detailed excerpts for each of the letters, allowing readers to scan through some of the most poignant passages before delving deeper. An added level of contextual information comes from Leslie Frost who offered commentary on his own letters upon their archiving at Trent University in Peterborough, thereby providing another layer of memory, albeit after a lifetime of reflection.

Yet it is the wartime letters that offer

us a tantalizing glimpse into the strange and terrifying world of Canadians at war. With no historian to mediate, we read the war through the letters of the two brothers, and their attempt to make sense of their experiences for themselves and those at home. Leslie enlisted in the spring of 1915, with Cecil following half a year later at the age of eighteen. From the start of their voyage overseas, they offered poignant remarks on their comrades, the sometimes absurdity of soldiering, and of course England. Cecil wrote wryly to his parents shortly after his arrival: "England is a very beautiful place but I would like to see the sun occasionally."

A mixture of dark humour, keen observation and obfuscating remarks fills the letters. The brothers evidently saw some things that they felt they could not communicate to those at home, either because of formal military censorship or the inability to formulate those experiences into words. But there is much here that sheds light on Canadian military operations, including issues of morale, discipline, views on commanders and their ongoing belief in the cause. Neither brother seems to have become jaded or disillusioned from the war service, despite the terrible strain. Even in the darkest days of the war, during the German March Offensive of 1918, Leslie would write confidently, "We are ready for him ... he is about to pay the price."

Leslie and Cecil served in the infantry and machine-gun corps – formations closest to the sharp end of battle – but the letters illustrate the remarkable resilience of the prewar civilian world seeping into this new world of soldiering. Both broth-

ers remained deeply interested in news from home, of local politics, and issues that we might consider normally pushed to the periphery from the minds of soldiers in wars for survival. The brothers' letters also attest to their strong link to Orillia, and their need to seek out home friends in the service. These letters illustrate not only the importance of keeping home front contact, but also of the need for these civilian-soldiers to retain parts of their civilian identities.

Both brothers survived the war, although they were injured on the battlefields, with Leslie's pelvis fractured and Cecil wounded in the head. Leslie had no idea what he wanted to do upon his return to "civvy street," but he wrote during his recovery, perhaps jokingly, that he would work in a "bank or sell shoelaces on the bank corner." In fact, he and his brother would go to law school, marry sisters, and enter politics. Both were Red Tories; Cecil would be an important political organizer as well as mayor of Lindsay, while Leslie would rise to be premier of Ontario from 1949 to 1961.

While there are more evocative letters of overseas soldiers, the Frost brothers provide insight into the Great War, the importance of constant communication with home, and considerable insight into their early political lives and interests. Although they rarely talked about the war, neither brother ever forgot it. Roberta Frost remarked of her shock when she was present when her husband, Cecil, was reunited with his batman more than a decade after

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R.B. Fleming, editor

the war. The two men hugged each other and wept. Roberta Frost had never seen her husband cry. Both Cecil and Leslie had been shaped in countless ways during the struggle, not all of which were visible for many years. The same could be said of the young nation of Canada.

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