

# *The Lost Letters of John MacCrae*

by Allan Levine

In the spring of 1900, a letter arrived at Treadwell, just up the lower Ottawa River from the village of L'Original.

The letter, marked Troopship Laurentian, Jan. 20, 1900. 9 p.m. read:

*My dear Laura:*

*Just ready to sail. This [letter] goes by the pilot and is just a last word to wish you goodbye. Perhaps by the time you see me back, you will have squared up the account with the man whom you told me about. If so, best of luck- but I dare say I shall come back and find the same old chum.*

*Goodbye and forgive the brevity. It looks as if it would be wild outside the harbour tonight; however it is all in a day's work*

*Bye bye,*

*Your old chum, Jack*

After surfacing in the early 1990s in New Jersey, roughly a dozen affectionate letters from Jack to Laura are back in Canada.

The letters give a tiny but invaluable snapshot of life among the privileged classes a century ago. But who was "Laura"? And who was "Jack"? And why were the letters returned?

Our story begins in the 19th century with Thomas Kains, who settled in Canada and married into the MacMillan clan.

Enter the "Paper Sleuth", Dr. Hugh R. MacMillan formerly of Guelph, now of Ottawa. Jack's letter is part of a collection of letters, postcards and other items found by MacMillan who is well known among historians and archivists for tracking and locating valuable documents for the Ontario Archives and other public institutions.

Over several decades of persistent research into his own family history, he discovered that Thomas Kains had married Mary McMillan (variant spelling noted), Hugh's ancestor.

MacMillan further identified Thomas Kains' descendent Archie and in doing so, discovered the letters between Jack and Laura.

Searching Kains-MacMillan connections, MacMillan located another descendent, Joan Ritchie of New Jersey who was in possession of the letters between Laura and Jack.

It is through Ritchie's generosity that these papers came to the John McCrae House in Guelph.

"Laura", the recipient of the letter, was Laura Kains (1873-1949). Archie's sister,

who was a descendant of Thomas, and later a federal civil servant in Ottawa.

"Jack" was none other than Lt-Col- John McCrae (1872-1918) Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps, a soldier and surgeon but much more famous as the author of the haunting poem *In Flanders Fields*.

When McCrae wrote to his beloved Laura, he had embarked with the Canadian forces for the Boer War.

The first group of letters, written in the early days of McCrae's career, begin July 18, 1893, when he is training as an artilleryman at Royal Military College in Kingston:

*"...I have a manservant .. Quite a nobby place it is, in fact .. My windows look right out across the bay, and are just near the water's edge; there is a good deal of shipping at present in the port; and the river looks very pretty, Yours, Jack'*

The letters continue from Guelph, in August, where McCrae was at the Ontario Agricultural College.

On Oct. 3, from Toronto, where he had a fellowship at the university; he wrote:

*"...Rugby football is in full swing now, in consequence for which I have a black eye, and a sore thumb which does not permit very good penmanship on my part.. Well Laura be sure you write before a very long time elapses. I know you may think I require punishment, but don'.*

*Yours very sincerely, Jack"*

McCrae's final letter in the first series was dated Feb. 8, 1895, in Toronto:

*"...I have been living very quietly this term, very little gaiety of any kind ... I know ,there is nothing in this letter to tempt you to write again. I know, however, that if I could tell you the piece of news I got today just before I got your letter, you would not feel so bitter against . me as perhaps you do...My only reason for saying anything about it, is that perhaps if you knew of it you would not think quite so badly of your ... chum.*

*Yours, Jack"*

We do not have another of Jack's letters until his debarkation for the Boer War. He writes from Kenhardt, in Cape Colony (and a long distance northeast of Capetown) on April 4, 1900:

*"...We are camped here for a few days at the end of a march of 230 miles through the worst country you can dream of ... we have had a good many of our men sick chiefly from bad water. Personally, I have been in excellent shape ... on the while, it is a great life... we have taken quite a lot of prisoners..."*



*Lt-Col. John McCrae.*

*Thanks to the perseverance of Hugh MacMillan, one of the founders of the SSF, valuable letters from John McCrae have been recovered and returned to his hometown of Guelph.*

*we have had no fighting yet but a lot of very hard work.*

*Yours, Jack"*

The very last of his known letters to Laura Kains is dated Oct. 9, 1900, and written from South Africa:

*"My dear Laura, I have not written for, quite a while... it is so hard to keep one's correspondence up to the mark. At present we are setting in camp here - a miserable place full of dust and dirt- hot like a furnace. Since leaving Pretoria we have been on two marches .. We have been in action twice since coming here. Yesterday afternoon was the latter of the two: we fired about 40 shells into Brother Boer, who made tracks over the hills. We did not lose any men. I have been in eleven scraps now of various size and of various importance. With very best wishes old chum ... believe me!*

*Yours very fondly, Jack"*

McCrae never married, and the other man in the abbreviated note is not easily identified. McCrae, later a doctor with the Canadian Expeditionary Force, succumbed to pneumonia in January 1918 in Boulogne, France, in the final year of the First World War. His short poem *In Flanders Fields*, first published in *Punch*, is an indelible reminder of the brutality and horror of trench warfare. ■

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