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Home from the White War

Postcards from Italy, 1918

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Katie, Billy's great-granddaughter, for bringing order to the collection.

Anna, for typing every word, scanning every photograph.

PREFACE

I offer you a collection of picture postcards, just one hundred years on. They are a fascinating record of northern Italy and the Lakes. They are a history book; and they are a love story. The correspondence is only one-way; I never saw any of my grandmother's answers. It is also incomplete. One or two were probably never delivered, one or two damaged in transit – perhaps not surprisingly. For not quite sixty years, they were a highly treasured memory, then for more than forty they have been in the family attic.

They reveal a very gentle, sensitive, artistic, ever-loving husband and father. He was a singer, pianist and organist, an avid reader, a lover of language. He was handsome, well-educated, sensible enough to keep his head down. The post was the most important part of his day, as for every other soldier. He sent home jewellery and clothing, figs and walnuts, pressed flowers, photographs. He received slippers, an air pillow, books and a pen, magazines – a stream of parcels, including tarts and cake and, of all things in Italy, tomatoes. Squashed.

He wrote many letters too, sent in parcels, or in an official 'greeney'. These have not been part of the collection, have been a large part of his story, and have been lost. However, we still have a feel for his life. He is 'lucky' to be on clerical duty, apparently safe, but often working from six in the morning to near midnight. Often, he does not really emerge from his tent for days on end. He has to put his bed up and down each day. It is not comfortable – but she sends an air pillow. The food is good, but not in summer and not as good as her cooking. The weather is often very hot, but even in summer biting cold in the mountain mornings. The water in the fire buckets froze. There were thunderstorms and very strong winds. The snow in January was very heavy but disappeared very quickly. There was even an earthquake in early May, but not in his area. Mosquitoes were bad – but she sent mosquito cream. The health of the army is a major problem, with an epidemic of Spanish Flu. He is confined to bed one day at least. He has to

have painful inoculations. His pal Jimmy falls seriously ill and is taken off by motor ambulance – but fortunately reappears before the end. He is always trying to reassure her that all is well and there is no danger. He is the master of understatement. He is a romantic, a dreamer. He thinks of her in the moonlight, in the mountains, in a small boat on the lake. He loves to walk, often with a close friend, often on his own. If possible, he would avoid the crowds, the mess. He loves the flowers and sends them home. He loves the distant views, as far as to Mont Blanc and, in another direction, to Venice. He loves to read and tries to learn Italian. He keeps quiet about his music, but does sing on several occasions. He is a very moral man, disapproving of the house of ‘low repute’, of the young Italian smokers, of Polly’s partner at home, ‘E’ - the rotten scoundrel. Polly was twenty years older than him.

The collection also reveals much between the lines. He does not describe his work, but he deals with leave, with battalion strength. Once he has to inform a soldier of the death of his wife. Rather more often, one assumes it is the other way around. He has to avoid naming places or troop movements. He often does the censoring himself. It is amusing, for example, when Milan is crossed out on a picture of Milan Cathedral. There is indeed information to be found. There are dangerous air-raids in London and the south-east. Buckinghamshire is much safer than Kent, until the latter stages of the war. He had been in the trenches in France and at the third battle at Ypres, at Passchendaele. He had undergone training at Whitley Bay and Seaton Delaval. He had been on leave approximately once a year, his final leave ending on September 18th, 1917. His son, William Arthur, ‘Billy’, was born in May 1915. His daughter, my mother, was born in July 1917. He returned home in early January and my Aunt Peg was born in October 1919. A strange life for newly-weds, very much in love, seeing each other for a matter of weeks in the first four years of marriage.

Officially, he tells us nothing. He would have us think he is on holiday. Only once are his affairs ‘hanging in the balance’. There is ‘uncertainty’ about the office, actually a few days after they had nearly been overrun by the Austrian army.

He is not allowed to say much and he never wants to say anything bad. There is a German offensive in April, in France, but soon the news from France is 'good'. We hear in August again of good news from France, in October, that Bulgaria has surrendered and that Turkey may follow. There are rumours that the central powers cannot continue. He feels sorry for the bedraggled Austrian prisoners. Then we have no cards at all between mid-October and late November, when it is all over. He may have been very busy, or written several celebratory letters – he certainly did not forget her in the euphoria.

The final two months see a curious combination of relaxation and heightened anxiety. There is dinner in a hotel, at which he is going to perform a song. There is a trip out to a celebration match, presumably football. There is a whist drive in the mess. He goes on local leave, on a steamer on Lake Garda. He sings at a carol service with a 'decent orchestra'. He attends Italian classes. However, the all abiding question is: can he get home for Christmas? He has to have proof of employment back home, but there is a delay. He has not got the official stamp. His former employers do all they can. And he just misses it.

We learn about Betty, too, my grandmother. She has two little babies, and both like to stay awake at night. They are both sick occasionally and there is a Flu epidemic at home in Blighty. She tries to write every day and knows how important it is for him. He dreams that they are sick and gets very anxious, unnecessarily. She is patient and long-suffering but can write gloomy letters of depression. She has friends and family, but she is approaching thirty, has had a good job and her own home and now has had a husband only for a few weeks here and there. She has two small babies. We never see what she writes. We only see perhaps half of what he writes. In the final analysis, his words are far better than mine.

CHAPTER 1: MEET MY GRANDFATHER

I was of the baby boomer generation. I like to think I am the same age as Israel, India, South Africa, West Germany, the National Health Service, North Korea. My father had survived the Second World War, by being classed a “Reserve Occupation” and he survived the illness and disease that swept Europe after 1945. He even survived the terrible winter of 1947, but succumbed, after several heart attacks, in the summer of 1949. My mother, with three little boys, could not face the sympathy, the pity of all those around her in Birmingham. So, she sold everything she had and bought a tumbledown ruin of a “smallholding”, in Kent. We were all too young to carry much evidence of our Brummie roots with us.

Just two years off his official retirement, William and Elizabeth Webb moved down to Kent in 1951 to be near my mother. They looked after her and then she looked after them and my Kentish childhood revolved around the three of them, with my two elder brothers seeming to be occasional visitors on the scene. My mum used to tell me that I was looked after by a faithful sheepdog, called Bill, and Cuthbert the cockerel. So, it was fortunate for me when my grandparents arrived on the scene.

Between them, they carved a garden out of the wilderness, a home out of the gaunt, rather stark house. He loved to mow the various pieces of grass into submission. There was the Nut Patch - I was not really allowed to cut that, almost not to walk on it. My job was the large Bottom Field. So, we lived outside in the garden most of the time. My grandfather used to wear a navy-blue beret – not actually his uniform, but it reminded him of his young days. I still have that. The other evidence of another lifetime was a carefully maintained .22 rifle. None of us boys showed much aptitude, as I remember, but he liked to take us to one very safe spot in the country, to try out on his “range”. He had all the official licences and admitted that at some point he had been a sniper, though presumably not with a .22 rifle. I think that period dated back to France and Belgium, but he was never keen to talk about that.

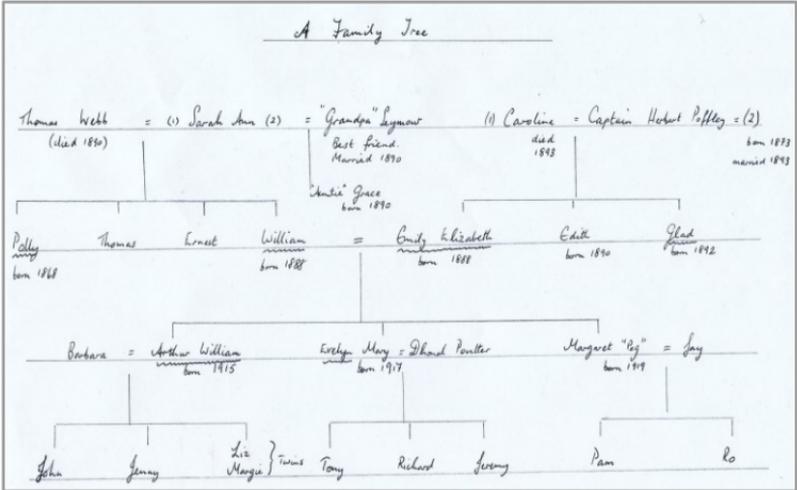
All his memories, now filtered through mine, are of Italy. He would throw bits of language at us – formaggio, pane, vino – grazie tanto – it was easy to see what he had needed to learn. When I later answered him back, he became very animated, gesticulating magnificently, like a true Italian. Now, I wonder why I never arranged to take him back to Lago di Garda. Perhaps he never wanted to, probably my grandmother would never have let him out of her sight to go there again and would have hated to see it for herself. I suppose when I was 20 he was already 80 and too old to go. But, his love of Italy never left him and, having received it from him at a very early age, I have never lost mine either.



Billy senior



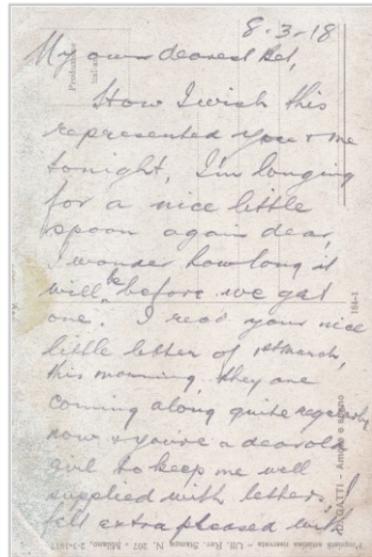
Billy junior with Evelyn, my mum



CHAPTER 2: BEFORE 1914

I have never tried to be systematic in piecing together the lives of my grandparents, preferring my hazy family anecdotes. The first postcard is sent from Gibraltar to Miss Poffley, living in a smart part of London. She worked in the civil service and, at the age of twenty, must have looked stunning. She preserved her Edwardian, very strait-laced attitudes for all of her life, while he was very much more flexible and forgiving. I still have a beautiful carriage clock, presented to her when she left to get married. Her family had military connections and for that reason their wedding was arranged for the hilltop church next to Dover Castle. Her father was Commander of Armaments at the castle. They had been based at Gibraltar at some time and there was a murky family story about her riding off into the North African sunset, on a camel! Since this did not fit with the strait-laced image, it was not much discussed.

She loved history and was amazingly good at knowing the dates of English monarchy. He liked to read Chaucer and Dickens and it is no surprise that I find myself liking history and literature. His tastes, I realised later, had much to do with Kent and he was very proud to show us Canterbury and the coast at Dover and St Margaret's Bay and Pegwell Bay. He told us about pilgrims and Pickwick, and Pip and Bleak House. I remember his dogs were called Pip and Biddy. He refers in his cards to Alkham, just inland from Dover and I've always thought this must have been his childhood home. He had a step-father, Grandpa Seymour and Polly, a much



older sister and Grace, his half-sister. Apart from literature, his schooling evidently gave him, like everyone else at that time, beautiful Copper-plate writing. I think this gave him early employment, and certainly rescued him from the front-line and put him into a relatively safe clerical position. I think Dickens would have found that deeply appropriate.

I have three clocks from this period, of which I am very proud. One is from the Civil Service. One belonged to my mother and she always described it as “a bit of Auntie Polly”. Anything of value in her home seemed to be another bit of Auntie Polly. The third clock belonged to my grandfather, also presented to him by a grateful employer. It has a base of Welsh granite, incredibly heavy. That sat on his mantelpiece for years, over the fire, getting Bible-blacker every day. The chime was deeply reassuring to me then and still is. He loved his clocks and was very proud of his grandfather clock. We thought it somehow appropriate that it was while winding that clock on a regular Sunday morning that he suffered a fatal heart attack.

So, they must have met near Dover, courted for at least six years, during which there must have been an element of social class. If my grandmother’s father was Commander of Armaments at Dover Barracks, and William signed on as a Private, there seems a surprise in there somewhere. Be that as it may, the wedding is planned for summer of 1914 and history intervenes. The date is fixed for July 18th, a date which I remember from their Golden and Diamond wedding celebrations. The storm clouds are rapidly gathering, however. They are living in Aylesbury, so he enlists with the Oxford and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry. He is allowed a little time for compassionate leave, but in mid-August is on his way.

CHAPTER 3: TRANSCRIPTIONS OF THE POSTCARDS 28/07/1917 – 02/04/1918

Postcard 1: 28/7/1917. Whitley Bay

My darling Bet,

I hope you will forgive me sending another card, dear, but as arranged I went into Whitley Bay yesterday afternoon to meet John White and didn't get back until about 10.30. We had a nice afternoon, went on the water for an hour, it was as still as a millpond and didn't give me the slightest symptoms of mal-de-mer. Lou went with me, John looked very queer I thought but seemed to benefit from the little trip, he said the row was 'champion'. Whitley Bay is a very nice place indeed and to see the crowds there yesterday one would never have thought there was a war on. They don't half know how to charge for teas, though. 1-6 each for a little pot of tea between us, three small half apricots each, and thin slices of bread and butter each and two small cakes each. I wasn't half disgusted with it, why I could easily have eaten the lot and then felt hungry.

This is just so that you don't miss a day, dearest. I want to catch this afternoon's post with this and then I shall write again presently, so that you get a letter on Tuesday.

Goodbye my dearest wife, all my love and kisses. Yours ever,
Billy.

p.s. I hope you could make out the shorthand on my other card. It was just telling you that the cash came to hand alright. Does Billy look for his pictures out of daddy's letters?

Postcards 2, 3: 8/2/1918. Bordighera.

My dearest Bet,

I haven't had a letter from you (except the fed up one from the battalion) for several days: I have been expecting a reply to my registered letter, in which I told you of my luck in getting put on clerical work here. I wanted to send these pc's to you before, but when I was at the place we weren't allowed to send them. But when we get away it doesn't matter.

I had a walk out this afternoon and it was lovely – we are having some perfect weather lately.

We usually have to work pretty late in the office but sometimes during the day are a bit slack, so have to take advantage of the fresh air when we get the chance.

I'm feeling A1 again now, the cold I caught just after getting here is practically better and I'm quite my old self again.

We can get baths here too and changes of underclothing, so the conditions are very different to when we were in the line at Ypres! Though thank goodness that nightmare is nearly forgotten now.

Don't let the kiddies destroy these pc's, dear, they are rather nice and I was in this place for about five weeks and the other one just over a week.

Write as often as you possibly can, dear, I do look forward so to your letters.

All my love and kisses, dearest, your ever loving Hubby, Billy.

p.s. I received Auntie Vic's parcel yesterday, also a joint letter from them and a letter from April Lawrence who asked to be remembered to you.

Postcards 4-8: 10/2/1918. Italy.

My dearest Bet,

I'm feeling a bit extra fed up today, I had quite expected a letter and none came for me, which makes it just about a week since I heard from you, and I naturally feel worried as in your last but one you told me that Masm [?] said you weren't looking well. I don't think you would miss writing many days if you were quite well and able to find time though you must try and make time, dear, even if it's only to write a few lines.

It was rather funny this morning. I went to a morning service in the ..area..hut and who should I see in there but one of the fellows who came out with me from Seaton Delaval – I hadn't seen him since we were at the base in France as he didn't come up the line with us, getting marked 'PB'! (permanent base) as soon as he got to France; It seemed quite nice to see a familiar face and have a talk about old times in Blighty. He is a nice boy and formed one of the party in our compartment the last time I came home on leave, before coming to France. It was my turn for a pass tonight so I went out with him for a little while. It's nice to have someone to talk to, but I am sick of this life, how thankful I shall be to get back to you dearest. We shall have a lot of lost time to make up for when I do get home again, shan't we? And if I have any luck we'll have some nice little outings.

I am sending you these cards as I thought you might like to see a bit of this part of the globe, though I've not been to any of the places except where the 'Castello Reggio' is.

I must stop now dear as it's getting late, I do hope you are alright, also the kiddies and write as often as you possibly can, there's an angel.

All the love and kisses dearest of your ever loving hubby,
Billy.

Postcard 9: 14/2/1918. Italy.

MDB, just a line to let you know I'm still getting along alright. I haven't had any letter today, but expect I shall get one tomorrow, in any case I will write a letter. Have been working pretty hard today as it's payday and it takes some time to get the pay sheets ready for our COY [*company*] which is a very large one. Still having grand weather, wish I could send a little of it along to you. Glad to say I'm feeling in the pink. All my love and kisses, for you and the bairns, yours ever B.

Postcard 10: 18/2/1918. Italy.

MDB, just a card to let you know that things are still going alright. I intended writing a letter but had an opportunity of going to a concert in the Soldiers Club so I went with one of the chaps from the office and quite enjoyed it. I haven't had a letter today dear. I do wish they'd come more often. It is still lovely and fine but the wind has been awfully cold today and froze the ice in our fire buckets.

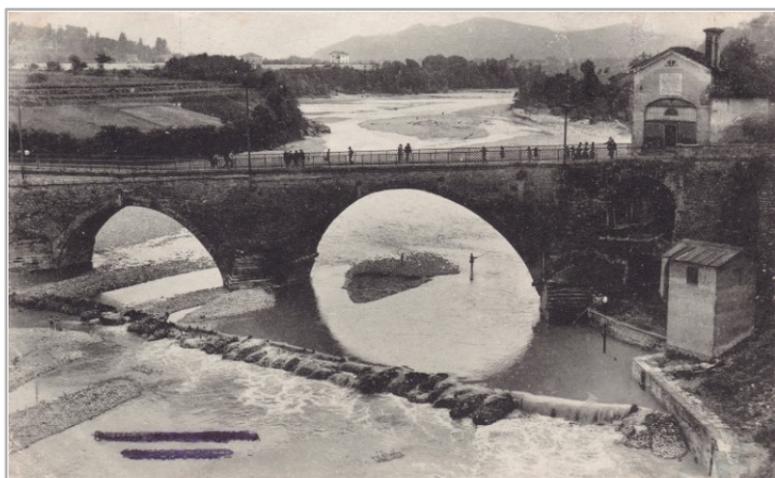
All my love and kisses for you and the bairns, yours ever B.

Postcard 11: 21/2/1918. Italy.

MDB, I don't feel like writing today, we've had a pretty thick time since early this morning and there's no mail today so I feel just a bit fed up. I am sending these pc's as promised yesterday. All my love dear, yours B.

Postcards 12, 13: 21/2/1918. Italy.

I had 'Laddie' given to me by one of the fellows in hosp, so shall read a bit of that after supper. I find it a rather cheering book when one gets the pip. This is the kind of place where these people do their washing. If you look closely into it, you can see figures on the patches of stone in the river.



Postcard 16: 23/2/1918. Italy.

MDB, I got your nice long letter of 16th today and I will write you a nice one tomorrow dear. I have managed to get hold of a green envelope too. All my love and kisses to you and the bairns, yours ever B.

Postcard 18: 25/2/1918. Italy.

MDDDB, thanks for short letter of 19th, I'm sorry not being able to write a letter tonight but we are terribly busy and expect we shall be tomorrow. If I can't send a letter will write another pc. Am still keeping fit; thought I saw Percy Kent go by in a draft yesterday – if you see Mr Kent to speak to ask him if he's out here. Love and kisses to you and bairns, yours B.

Postcard 19: 28/2/1918. Villa della Rose. Italy.

My dearest Bet, I'm sorry I haven't had time to write a letter today, dear but have had a long day of it again; it makes me feel a bit stuffed up not being able to get out for several days on end; I expect we shall soon get straight though; I like to get a little exercise, this is just the other extreme; still I mustn't grumble; I have much to be thankful for. I hope you like these cards, I didn't choose them myself but a fellow who went to the place got them for me. I haven't had any letters today, Polly's parcels haven't turned up. All my love and kisses dearest and some for the bairns. Yours ever, Billy.

Postcard 20: 02/3/1918.

MDDDB, Sorry I haven't been able to write a letter today and I might not be able to tomorrow as we have prospects of a very busy day, but I have another green env which I will use as soon as poss; I've also got a little souvenir for each of you which I will send as soon as I can get a regd envelope.

Hope your colds are getting better. All my love and kisses for you and bairns.

Postcard 23-25: 08/3/1918.

My own dearest Bet, how I wish this represented you and me tonight, I'm longing for a nice little spoon again. I wonder how long it will be before we get one. I read your nice little letter of 1st March this morning, they are coming along quite regularly now and you're a dear old girl to keep me well supplied with letters. I felt extra pleased with today. I was about the only one in our place that had one, but they don't all write as regularly as I so they can't expect them. I had a pass out this afternoon and walked to



that place of which you've had one or two pc's and got these pc's and another little brooch for you dear; I got three altogether, they are silver butterflies and I'm sending one each to Polly and Grace, if you think your mum would like one let me know and I will send her one also – I think them very pretty and they are not at all expensive. I'm also sending you a lace bordered silk hanky, Milanese manufacture. I hope you like it sweetheart.

I didn't blame you at all dear when I was getting no letters – I knew only too well that they must be getting hung up somewhere cos everybody was in the same boat, but I got a bit disappointed at the number I had when they did start getting to me; they are coming quite nicely now dear; try and keep it up won't you. All my love and kisses dearest and some for the wee bairns. Your ever loving hubby, Billy.