



# Archives and Records

The Journal of the Archives and Records Association

ISSN: 2325-7962 (Print) 2325-7989 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cjsa21>

## The First World War Letters of Philip and Ruth Hewetson

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To cite this article: Michael Page (2015) The First World War Letters of Philip and Ruth Hewetson, Archives and Records, 36:2, 245-247, DOI: [10.1080/23257962.2015.1072087](https://doi.org/10.1080/23257962.2015.1072087)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23257962.2015.1072087>



Published online: 21 Sep 2015.



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themes which may already be familiar, we need to remain sensitive to their local dimensions outside Anglophone contexts. For UK readers, the wider ambitions of this book may therefore be of less significance than its fascinating overview of the archival domain in contemporary France, through reference to conceptual debates, policies and practice.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23257962.2015.1070721>

**The First World War Letters of Philip and Ruth Hewetson**, edited by Frank Meeres, Norwich, Norfolk Record Society, 2014 (Volume LXXVIII), xiv + 365 pp., £18.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-9556357-7-9

This attractive volume reflects the parts played in the Great War by Philip and Ruth Hewetson, the children of the Rev William Hewetson, vicar of Salhouse with Wroxham in the Norfolk Broads, and his wife Kathleen. Philip Hewetson served as an officer in the Loyal North Lancashire Regiment between volunteering in 1914 and his death as a prisoner of war in July 1918, aged 24, and his sister Ruth Hewetson worked as a General Service Member of a Volunteer Aid Detachment at the huge Fargo military hospital on Salisbury Plain in 1918. Philip's war is recorded in 246 letters from him to his family and Ruth's in 60 letters to her parents.

Philip's jaunty letters are a rich source of detail about the life and daily routine of an infantry subaltern on the Western Front all of which he conveys with great immediacy. He describes the constant cyclical movements of his units (the 1st Battalion until he was invalided home in September 1915 after being wounded at the Battle of Loos, the 9th from his return to France in March 1917 and a final tour of duty with a Brigade Instructional Platoon) as they marched from the firing trenches, through the support and reserve lines and back to the front line, interspersed with rest periods behind the lines. The variety of billets, more or less comfortable according to rank, the haggling to secure them and the reception from the French farmers and householders are vividly conveyed. The reader also gets a strong sense of the mighty bureaucratic machine which drove the British Expeditionary Force, with a multitude of printed forms documenting a battalion's every movement and ensuring its members were properly fed, trained, rested and (occasionally) given leave. The letters, too, bear testimony to the extraordinarily efficient postal service which kept those at the front in constant touch with their loved ones, with books, luxuries, fresh clothing and food parcels (even containing fresh fruit and meat products, which frequently arrived in an edible condition) passing in one direction and, sometimes, dirty washing passing in the other. It is very apparent how vital the precious stream of news from home was in maintaining morale among the troops.

The interest of Philip's letters fluctuates. After being wounded at Loos he spent 1916 in Felixstowe, and the tennis parties and social whirl he enthusiastically describes might weary some readers. In general, the tone of the letters is relentlessly upbeat throughout. Philip's is a cheery world, comrades are 'splendid' and parcels 'ripping'. He is not much given, at least on paper, to reflect on the cause he is fighting for and his Christian faith

appears untroubled by the carnage: 'It makes us all "think" out here' (letter 48) is as much insight as one gets. The stench and horror of the trenches are absent from the letters, and the tone can be quite 'Boy's Own': in letter 234 of April 1918, when the British Army was reeling back in disarray, Philip, newly arrived back in the trenches, writes 'Everybody is full of their experiences & the extraordinary & exciting & thrilling happenings of the past weeks. I have heard some wonderful adventures & yarns already & descriptions of the fighting'. Curious too is the lack of information about many of the lower ranks within Philip's company. His fellow officers are chronicled and the sociability of the mess is a constant theme, but there is no real suggestion of the strong bond that, for example, Edmund Blunden forged with the men he commanded. Although Philip had to participate in occasional courts martial, including of conscientious objectors in Felixstowe, he makes no comment on the cases that he witnessed.

Of course these omissions, which leave the reader with many unanswered questions, are not unusual in letters home from the trenches. Such letters served as tokens of emotional reassurance, both for the families back home who awaited them with such fearful anticipation and for the young men thrust into a situation of unimaginable frightfulness who yearned for reminders of the normality they had left behind and perhaps had no wish to articulate the emotions they were experiencing. Censorship, too, played its part in what could and could not be said, but for officers self-censorship was as great a factor in dictating the tone and content of their letters. It was in later memoirs, generally, that some of those who served in the Great War cathartically confronted the reality of their experiences and could say what had been unsayable in their letters. Philip of course did not have the opportunity to write his memoirs.

Ruth Hewetson's letters, written between March and October 1918 from Fargo Military Hospital, provide a lively and poignant record of a young (she had her twenty-first birthday in July) middle class woman's determination to play her part while enduring for the first time prolonged separation from her family, hard physical work and exposure to co-workers from a variety of very different social backgrounds. These experiences were shared by many thousands of women because of the demands of the war; however, they are less well represented in surviving letter collections which gives Ruth's letters added value.

She did not work in the hospital wards but rather, as a General Service VAD, her duties ranged from cleaning the living huts of the nurses to kitchen duties in the staff canteen, duties which she undertook with pride and a determination to shine, though they must have been far removed from her previous experience. Her physical surroundings, daily routine, pay and leave allowance are all described with a pleasing amount of detail and she is much absorbed in documenting the state of her friendships with the other VADs. Like her brother she generally tries to conceal any emotional volatility and shares his determination to present a cheerful face and reassure her parents that all is well and her growing self-confidence and self-reliance are very evident. Ruth's family had clearly thought long and hard about which organization she should join to ensure she was working alongside people of a similar class, rejecting the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps for that reason, but her letters express growing dismay she is being forced to mix with the wrong sort of person – 'servant type' as she puts it in letter 288. In June she learns that Philip has been reported missing and the agony of waiting for definite news and being unable to comfort her parents in person is vividly conveyed.

The letters have been well edited and good use made of battalion war diaries and other sources to track the movement and activities of Philip's units on the Western Front and to clarify other references. The editor has successfully identified most of the other persons

mentioned in the letters, and glossaries provide potted biographies of the family members and Philip's army acquaintances. Eight photographs illustrate the text, including photographs and representative letters of both writers. Four maps depict the Western Front and the battles of Loos, Messines and the Aisne, although, reproduced as they are from older military histories and in black and white rather than colour, they are not always easy to interpret.

Altogether, this volume is a welcome addition to the burgeoning corpus of published firsthand testimony to the impact on families and communities of the first global war between industrialized nations.

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