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An Unknown Prophet

William Jordan Currin, Denison Class of 1913, and the Great War

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William Jordan Currin, or "Hike," as he was known to friends and family alike, was the first alumnus of Denison University to be killed in World War I. This essay tells his story, or at least the little we know of it from our archives at the college on the hill.

Stories like this are going to become increasingly common in the next half-decade or so. In four years, we will be commemorating the hundredth anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War - a war that lasted from 1914 to 1918. The Great War, as it was called then and by historians now, is certainly well known to students of American and European history. But the war remains somewhat in the shadows of its more lethal 20th century partner, the Second World War. This is the case for obvious reasons (it happened in the more distant past; American involvement was much briefer; and while horrifically lethal, the Great War still caused only about 1/5th - 1/6th of the fatalities of World War II).

The Great War and the Modern Age

Certainly World War I has not been forgotten. A casual student of military and world history knows at least a little about the uniquely horrific nature of trench warfare and the first intensive experience of total war in which citizens were enlisted to fight for the cause. But The Great War nonetheless is sometimes assessed as entirely entwined with World War II — as preamble, overture, instigator, rehearsal. Some have even asked if the delineation between the wars makes sense.



William Jordan Currin's yearbook photo, 1913.

Might it be appropriate for future historians to look at the early twentieth century and speak of another European Thirty Years War?

But World War I was clearly far more than precursor. The Europe — and in terms of imperial extension — the world that went to war in 1914 was not the same as the Europe — and world — that entered into peace negotiations in 1918. The Great War was an extraordinarily brutal four years that created tremendous rupture.

The nature of that rupture has been the focus of a significant amount of historical scholarship over the last

forty years. A dominant theme has emerged in that research: the war as the catalyst, or the herald, or — some have even argued — the creator of the modern age. A few titles demonstrate the point: *The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age*; *The Great War and the Shaping of the 20th Century*; *The Great War & the Search for Modern Order*; *The Great War and Modern Memory*. Beyond suggesting that historians might benefit from using a thesaurus, an important and shared theme about historical change is suggested in all of this literature. The final listed work, Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*, is a classic of cultural military history. Fussell's argument holds that "The Great War reversed the Idea of Progress."¹ His cultural history contends that the war brought forth a distinctly modern mode of expression which was full of irony and euphemism, devoid of lofty ideals and impulsive emotion. Fussell's view is that emotion and ideals had been the stuff which had fueled the notion of progress; the Great War had proven that such progress was deadly.

Nineteenth-century forms of Western cultural expression had been marked first by Romantic heroism and later by Victorian melodrama — both in their own ways reactions against Enlightenment visions of progress. While these cultural forms provided an escape from positivism, World War I closed the door to any such escape, and instead made clear that there could (to quote a phrase from the time) "never be such innocence again."² Fussell's book focuses on literature, arguing that the wrenching poetry of World War I authors like Wilfred Owen & Siegfried Sassoon or the memoirs of Sassoon & Rupert Graves,



"They Shall Not Pass." A French propaganda poster of World War I.

established the foundation for twentieth century writers like Hemingway and Eliot, and later Vonnegut, Pynchon, and Heller. An example from popular culture clarifies Fussell's point. Consider the Black Humor of the British series *Monty Python* and its 1975 film *The Holy Grail*. One of the most famous scenes from that famously funny film is that of The Black Knight. The film parodies through ludicrous irony the



VEDA VANDERHORST, A.B., Sigma Delta Phi, Philo.
General H. S. Adytum Board (3), Chaplain Philo.

Veda came to us four years ago from the wilds of northern Michigan. At first sight she doesn't impress you as a very excitable person but occasionally she does not let that extreme and when much interested can talk for the hour. Her early relations with an alarm clock made her famous at Denison. Like some other people who are about to leave us, Veda has greatly improved her health in the last two years by cross-country walking, not alone nor yet in a crowd.

W. J. CURRIN, Ph.D., Alpha Nu Sigma, Franklin.
Ed. Denisonian (4), Ed. Adytum (3), Rec. Sec. Franklin (3), Frank-
lin Play (1), French Play (3), (4), Pres. Lecture Course Assn.
(4), Y. M. C. A. Cal. (4), Junior B. Com. (3).

Will more was some kid when he first came into town. Throughout his career "Hike" has held down the position of a conscientious professor. As a connoisseur of words "Hike" takes the big term. When he doesn't advocate his French or display his English, the sun never sets. He managed to assume such an innocent air with the Adytum that they let him in on the "refuse sheet" and at once he brought that marvellous lesson checked out. About the biggest thing he did as a Freshman was to almost make Phi Beta Kappa, while as a Senior he was well known as the one big advocate of mixed dramas.

Hike Currin was described as one who took the "big firsts" in the Denison yearbook, *Adytum*.

the notions of chivalry and honorable warfare. For those unfamiliar with Monty Python's Black Knight, the scene goes like this:

- King Arthur rides up on his absent horse
- He sees the Black Knight fight against an opponent and states, "You fight with the strength of many men. I am Arthur, King of Camelot. Will you join me?"
- The knight refuses to respond. The king states, "You sadden me."
- Arthur goes to move on and the Knight speaks: "None shall pass. I move for no man."
- A battle ensues; King Arthur wins and in the process, in quick but gruesome detail, cuts off each of the Knight's limbs.
- When he loses his right arm, the Knight resolutely calls to battle, "Tis but a scratch;" when he loses the left, he airily says that it is only a "Flesh wound;" until — arms & legs gone, he declares: "We'll call it a draw."³

It is a preposterously silly scene that elicits much laughter among Python fans everywhere. The joke demonstrates Fussell's central point: Western audiences neither would nor could have laughed at such a macabre and grotesque scene in the nineteenth centu-

ry. Laughter at the Black Knight's bravado and destruction can only emerge in a era that is post-chivalry, -hope, and -heartbreak. The humor of the Black Knight reflects the modern age of irony. While irony surely predated World War I, the Python form of black humor remains instructive, for the extraordinary selflessness of the ludicrous Black Knight had its roots in the selfless purposelessness of the Great War. Indeed, the rallying cry for the French at the Battle of Verdun was "They shall not pass."⁴ The ferocious fighting to hold the line at Verdun formed the greatest attrition battle of the war. The French did not let the Germans pass — at a price of 380,000 casualties, 40,000 more than those suffered by the Germans. The French line held, but at what staggering cost? Unanswerable questions like these led many contemporaries to simple, pure despair. And out of that despair emerged a fundamentally new way of understanding the world. Battles like Verdun, Gallipoli, the Somme, and Ypres were so inconceivably atrocious that the Western cultural understanding changed into something darker, more cynical, more ironic.

The letters of William Jordan Currin offer a personal, vivid, local evidence for this shift in cultural understanding. These letters are not easy to categorize, and I have no intention of essentializing Currin's life and death into a pat scholarly thesis. My reaction to these beautiful texts is much more basic: Hike Currin went to Europe as a young man seizing life. Yet while there, the voice he was willing to share with correspondents became less accessible and adventurous, increasingly distant and ironic. And while he was there, he died. His was but one voice of the Lost Generation who articulated the dawn of a darker modernity.

The Great War and Hike Currin

A native of Marion, Ohio, whose family also lived for periods in Detroit and Cleveland, William Jordan Currin in 1914 did the opposite of what some college-age Americans would do in the 1960s: instead of fleeing America to Canada in order to avoid war, in the summer of 1914 he left America for Canada to join war. (America would not enter until April 1917). Currin preceded his country; by September 30, 1914, he found himself en route to Europe in the Canadian Expeditionary Force. More than three years later, his parents received a notice from the Canadian War Office

dated November 19, 1917, which stated simply:

Deeply regret inform you No. 42667, Will J. Currin officially reported died of wounds, First Lancashire Ambulance Field Hospital — gunshot wound — head.⁵

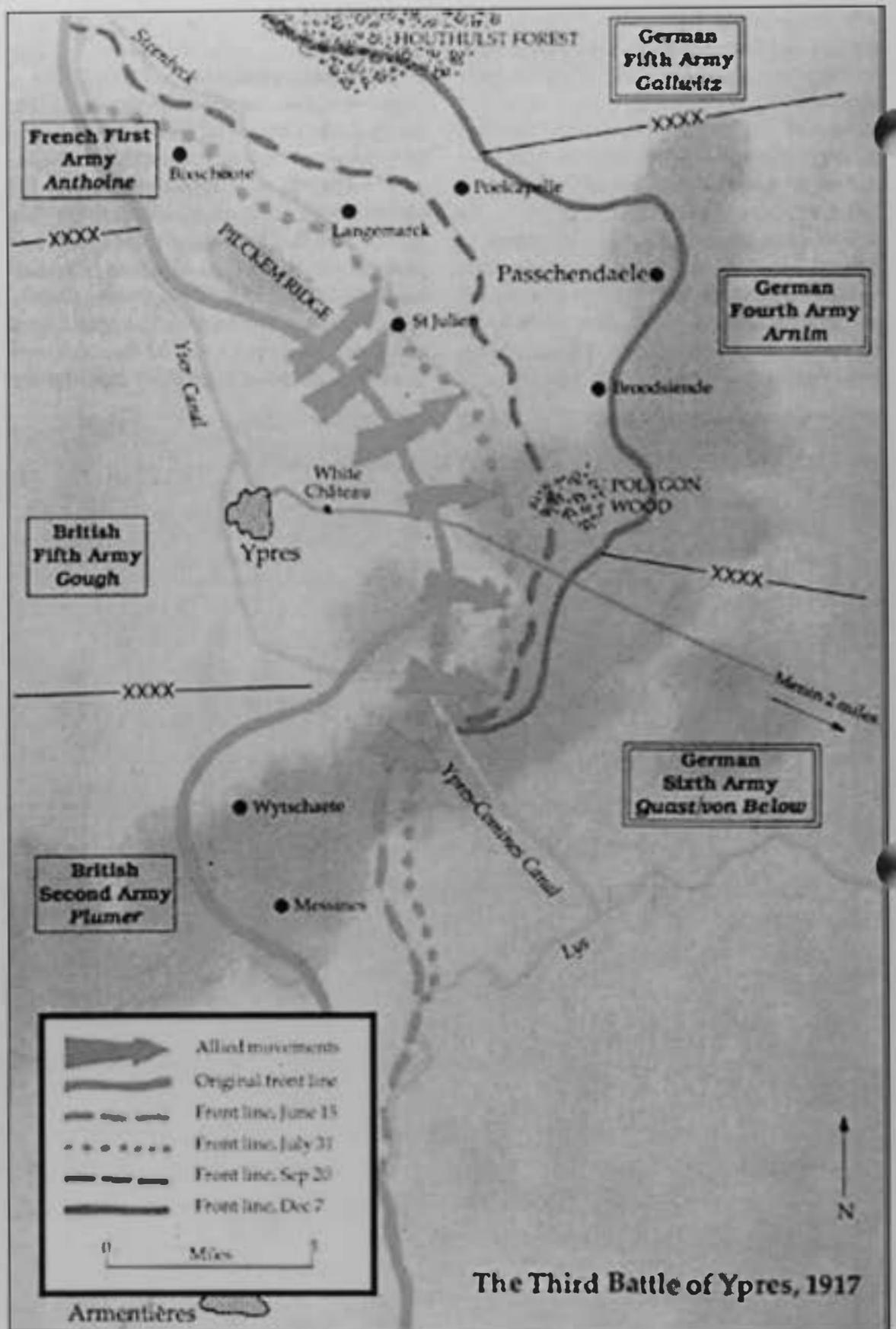
In its January 1918 edition, *The Denison Alumni Bulletin* noted Currin's death with much greater poignancy, noting it as:

Denison's first blood sacrifice on the altar of a World War. 'Tis a dreary chant they have sent us from over the seas, but high above it sounds the clear true notes of a life whose music will sound in our hearts forever.⁶

Currin's death received six pages of coverage in that edition of the *Alumni Bulletin*; his escapades as a soldier had been reported with some regularity on the pages of the publication over the three years prior. He was a young man well known and well loved at Denison. After his death, his classmates and teachers banded together to commemorate Currin's passing with special recognition in "a bronze tablet," as the call for donations described it.⁷ I venture to guess that many readers of this narrative have walked past this bronze tablet on multiple occasions, a few of you daily. Any guesses as to where this plaque is located?⁸ The plaque

reads as follows: "Denison's first sacrifice in the world's war for liberty. 'He lived the life of a Christian gentleman and died a brave man.'"

This essay does not attempt to speculate on the extent to which Currin lived the life of a Christian gentleman. As interesting as the topic may be, I also am not going to examine here what the nature of this commemoration tells us about Denison in the early part of the last century. *The Alumni Bulletin* joined in the spirit of the



plaque by claiming that Currin "died for the world."⁹ Yet an examination of the record suggests that Currin himself would not have put his death quite so grandly.

I am not a World War I historian *per se*, but World War I brought me to the field of history. The first time I learned of the enormous complexity to be found in the study of the past is when I studied the origins of World War I in high school. Though my research interests in graduate school went in another direction, I always

knew that as a professional historian, I would return to this war. A seminar on World War I was one of the first courses I designed when I began teaching at Denison. And when I first read the plaque in Doane Hall (for historians are inclined to read such things), I was intrigued. I knew I had to know more. So I called Florence Hoffman, now Denison's *emerita* archivist. And, not surprisingly, Flo knew more.

Edith Philbrook and Lily Belle Sefton

Several years earlier, Flo had received a call from an alumna in possession of a packet of letters she wanted to give to the Denison archives. The woman had been a friend of Edith Philbrook, a member of the class of 1912, who had died years before and left with her friend the correspondence in question; these letters were written by Hike Currin to Edith Philbrook during the war. The caption for Edith's yearbook picture is quite intriguing: "Edith has a biological turn of mind, and takes keen delight in removing the epidermis from felines who have departed this vale of tears by the chloroform route. She is also a fluent orator, and does effective work in separating poor, oppressed students from their filthy lucre, on sundry pretexts. Edith would make a valuable president for a suffragette society."¹⁰ Her activities include serving as Vice President of the senior class as well as numerous posts in scientific and philosophical clubs.

When Flo met Edith's friend so many decades later, Flo asked the friend about the nature of Currin and Philbrook's relationship. As a good lady of that era, the friend kept mum. Indeed, from the letters one cannot divine the nature of Edith and Hike's friendship, and that uncertainty is one of the things that make the letters so intriguing. The past keeps many mysteries unto itself.

The other main source used in this essay consists of the letters published in the *Denison Alumni Bulletin* from another alumna of Currin's era, Lily Belle Sefton, class of 1911. Sefton's yearbook page notes her engagement in the sciences, her activity on the *Denisonian* and the yearbook staffs, as well as her role as Class Historian. Sefton, one of the first women to teach science at Denison and a great subject to study in her own right, provided the *Alumni Bulletin* with excerpts from Currin's correspondence during the period from 1914 to 1917.

Like most sources, the two foundations of this essay

have their lapses. Philbrook's letters offer no clear sense of her relationship with Currin except that which we might conjecture. Sefton's letters add the complicated issue of editing, for surely Sefton only gave to the *Bulletin* those letters that she thought would be appropriate for a broad audience; no doubt the *Alumni Bulletin* editor also had his say. In both cases, we only have Currin's side of the correspondence — nothing from the women.

Still, the letters are enormously rich. I offer a few snippets on a range of subjects:¹¹

ON DENISON: to Philbrook he talks of build-ings and budget battles: "*So they speak of tunnels thru College Hill and elevators up and down, do they? Our friend the immutable L.B.S. declares they can't buy a tin bone spectroscope for inspecti' the rainbow tints of the little amoeba's wings in the meantime, and that the Biol. Dept. languishes in consequence. Poor old Biologs!*"; But most of his comments cite Denison & Granville as a haven in his memory: "*The job drags, L.B., it drags horribly and the active mind turns to the lost images it knew of a different order of life in a little college town.*"

ON AMERICA: "*Does our country not know or does she just not care?*"; on 4 July 1915: "*Of all days!...What would G. Washington have to say in such days as these? And what will W. Wilson say? Which is perhaps more to the point.*"

ON THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION: "*Someone has just brought in a five day old newspaper from 'Blighty' with all the latest news about the apparent revolution in Russia. I'm leaving off to listen about the Red Flag upon the Winter Palace — those are events, there!*" (1 April 1917)

Currin also provides insight into the nature of conflict on the Western Front; he served as a bombardier, a non-commissioned artillery officer, in the 3rd Brigade of the Canadian Field Artillery. This Brigade spent the war in Flanders, near Ypres, (one of the bloodiest and most contested terrains of the Western Front). In this passage from a letter dated 30 April 1915, he describes the 2nd Battle of Ypres, where poison gas was first used; many Canadian troops were subjected to it: "*I am writing this on a cannon in the midst of the first battle I have ever seen...Two words will tell the story of everything we've done since I wrote last — digging trenches. It is beastly work.*

Yesterday this fair France land was prinking in the sunlight, putting on most marvelous garments — pink and gray and green and gold — today one can't see through the smoke...bullets are popping merrily; men dropping like flies. Everywhere around me as I write noise, and dust and dirt and confusion — and tomorrow — the first of May.” This passage is significant both for the quality of the writing and for its moment in time. Currin came out of 2nd Ypres injured, though the evidence at hand does not reveal to what extent. He refuses to acknowledge those injuries to his two female correspondents; several months later he writes to Lily Belle: “*I have used a whole bottle of good ink denying that I am on the casualty list.*”

While each of these excerpts provide a provocative basis for historical exploration, the remainder of this essay focuses on placing Currin in the context of the emerging modern sensibility described earlier. It is almost cliché to speak of the post-World War I Lost Generation, but the machinery of this very defensive, very brutal war did indeed literally destroy millions of those men, including Currin. Many survivors faced spiritual destruction, another defining element of the Lost Generation. As a result of combat and horrors witnessed, many of these men found themselves as a result alienated from their former selves, their former homes, their former countries. William Jordan Currin's correspondence places him squarely in the midst of that Lost Generation. He went to war for adventure — yet once there, adventure was drowned out by gunfire and duty. His correspondence shows a man increasingly distanced himself from his trench surroundings. In the end that distance also separated him from those at home and from his former life.

Hike Currin's Search for Adventure

So on to William Jordan Currin, or “Hike”. The *Adytum* provides an insightful look at our subject:

Will sure was some kid when he first came to town...As a compendium of words, 'Hike' takes the big firsts. When he doesn't advertise his French or display his English, the sun rises not...About the biggest thing he did as a Freshman was to almost make Phi Beta Kappa, while as a Senior he was well known as the one big advocate of mixed dramatics.¹²

Here is a profile of someone bright and talented, an individual with some flair, perhaps also a flair for

women. Lilly Bell Sefton wrote that he was one of the leaders of the class of '13, calling him the “*Editor of everything about the school that needed editing.*”

What made this unique character head north to Canada in order to fight? My reading of the evidence suggests that he was driven by a need to be a part of the grand adventure of his time. He had been unhappy in his first job at a suburban Cleveland newspaper, and before war broke out he asked a friend to help him find other work:

I am going to Chicago this coming summer and if you do not help me to get a job out in the open somewhere, where I can hear the birds and see the flowers and the green grass and the blue sky, I will not own you for my uncle [friend]. I am tired of sitting on a three-legged stool, just a cub reporter for a penny paper. I want to live my life in all its largeness and its fullness and its joy.

Other evidence corroborates Currin's desire to get out and be a part of it all. His early letters abound with a simple enthusiasm for being. The first wartime letter to Sefton describes the filth of the training regimen but then exults, still — “*This, my friend L.B., this is the life.*” His next letter declares: “*Do you know, for any one with eyes and any notion of perspective, this country, at this time, is the most interesting place in the world, bar none.*” The editor of all there was to edit saw his presence in the ‘most interesting place in the world’ as an opportunity to write and record the war for himself, perhaps even for a greater audience. Conveying the experience of his first battle by writing a letter on the base of his cannon suggests as much. It is thus a striking contrast that in a later letter, Currin writes simply, “*Same old stuff going on with us...so I've nothing to tell you.*”

But in his early letters, adventure writing seems to be a vocation: To Sefton on 30 September 1914: “*When THIS excitement is over, I'm going to be a sailor bold and skim the glassy deep somewhere between the Panama Canal and Ceylon (or else run a gasoline launch over on Buckeye [Lake]). Kindly keep your eyes open for a matron for my-er-schooner.*” To Philbrook on 24 July 1916: “*I think I've an engagement somewhere south of the island of Guam when I'm through with Flanders. I've always favored those warm countries, anyway, and resent Flemish rains. cold from the North Sea, the more because of it.*” Guam, Ceylon, Panama, and Buckeye Lake intermin-

gle in his descriptions of the routine of training, the landscape of first Britain then Flanders, the prospect of what might come next.

Adventure Loses Its Luster

Yet Currin, in the spirit of soldiers from time immemorial, also sought to protect those at home from the true nature of the adventures he was confronting. After 2nd Ypres, when his correspondents were quite worried about his injuries, he wrote to Sefton:

Let me tell you a word about this adventure stuff – I've had lots more excitement on a 'forbidden road' back in old Granville with street council just the turn of the road behind. Our division is resting in a peaceful little corner here in Belgium – a little village about the size of Granville with the traditional grey walls and red roofs. The Germans are busy up in Poland and we're just waiting. When this miserable sit-on-a-stump-and-bite-your-nails-for-exercise-war is over, I'm going to find an army where they have no harness. All said and done, tho, I'm glad I came. (Summer 1915)

Many of his early letters to Sefton reflect that spirit. It is likely that Lilly Bell wanted to share with readers of the *Alumni Bulletin* the notion of a cause worth fighting for, as well as a soldier with a spirit of dedication. Even as late as a 1917 letter in the *Alumni Bulletin*, he maintains that spirit — though it is housed in a rather different body: *"It is good to be alive even with rheumatic arms and legs. I tell you, L.B., that, even tho Fritz should put his stamp on me this night, I regret nothing that lies between me and Granville. It has been Life, and Life my friend, is not to be despised at any cost."*

The Philbrook letters, on the other hand, reveal greater complexity. Currin describes himself therein as a man torn between a sense of duty and a suppressed desire for adventure. From training in England, he sends to Edith an extended and mirthful dialogue of the good and evil at war within his conscience; in this letter, he adopts an alter ego called Launcelot Gobbo Currin. Launcelot Gobbo is a Shakespearean fool from *The Merchant of Venice*. Currin's Gobbo finds himself in a predicament:

Hang it, though, I was up to go to Scotland, way up in the Highlands, for a week...and the "no-pass-getting-ready-for-France" stuff has knocked THAT in the head. If I hadn't a clear crime sheet so



Currin in a photo taken around 1917.

far I'd run for it, I think, and join a Highland crowd instead of coming back...

Consider: Lancelot Gobbo in service uniform, driving whip in hand, with his untarnished record on the one hand and a vista of Ben Nevis and Loch Lomond...on the other.

"'Budge'" says the friend, and 'budge not' says the blank crime sheet...

"If I budge not, I shall surely die without sight of the bonnie hills of Scotland, and that were worse than to be damned. Beside thou mayest in any case be damned hereafter, and there-- oh, to be doubly damned!..."

"'Remember,' cautions the white crime sheet, 'remember that discretion is still the better part of valour, and stand fast. Beside the Germans may not shoot straight, and thou mayest come back..."

back...And so poor Gobbo Currin...Canadian Overseas Ex. Force, stoppeth in the middle of the road, with is two feet wetted by the mud, and considereth the respective calls of duty and pleasure. May the best man win! Amen.'

These competing calls resound throughout his correspondence with Edith Philbrook. Of course, duty wins out and Currin never does see Scotland's bonnie hills. He writes in 1916: "*No, no long paragraphs of pity please. It's our life and we're for it, that's all.*"

Currin went to war to get off his three-legged stool. Once there he finds himself bound to a new sort of taskmaster: the soldier's life. By late 1916 (the year of Verdun & the Somme), he writes to Philbrook:

C'est la guerre — the inevitable fatality that rests with us in the North of France. He is back and the job has him again — the stupid job of killing men and that by machinery! What an insanity that really is, you comprehend only when you have been part of the machine — insanity and a species of prostitution! (Late 1916)

A stark contrast exists between this passage and Denison's epitaph commemorating a hero who died for the "world." Later still, Currin would write: "*Thank God as you have never thanked Him before that you are...a safe distance from this borderland of Hell.*" Yet when Sefton asks him if he will leave the front after three years of service, he responds, "*Tut! Tut! What talk is this, of three years' terms and such things as that? Don't you know we're in it for good and will be e'en waitin here tae its end? And the end, my good friend, verily, verily, the end is not yet.*" Three years in, he is of the machinery of war; he cannot and will not leave it. Hike Currin is a soldier, until the end.

The letters to Sefton strongly reflect a sense of that dogged duty; the ones to Edith Philbrook reveal a subtler portrait of the man. The early letters to Edith suggest a tender friendship — in 1915, he comments at length on a photo she sends him, asking, "*Where do they grow new-looking eyes?...You've got the newest strangest glint of something doing in your bran-new face and I'm curious what it's all about. Something must be up.*" He continues along these lines until he says, "*Well, it's getting rainy, dark, and I've been sitting here scribbling this nonsense to you till I've a cramp in my leg...If I don't get up now I'll likely perish on the spot and be buried here. And I wish to see your other — newest — picture yet.*" While perhaps

not the stuff of a love letter, warm affection infuses his playful tone. In the later, much briefer letters, this affectionate spirit diminishes. The extraordinarily different experiences, as well as the wear of years and miles, could do nothing less than create distance between these old friends.

Correspondence by Letter and by Postcard

The nature of the mail also enforced a distance. Mail formed a central part of the soldier's life in the Great War. But the bureaucracy of military life and the interminable duration of life in the trenches also dulled the spirit and substance of personal correspondence. The soldier's love for those at home necessarily created an insurmountable obstacle to true communication — no small amount of irony, there. As Fussell puts it, "Ironically, the reticence which originated in the [soldier] writers' sympathy for...their addressees was destined in the long run simply to widen the chasm of incomprehension which opened between them."¹³ Fussell uses the example of the United Kingdom's "Field Service Postcard" to demonstrate the point.

This postcard was an invention of total warfare, in which military endurance and civilian mobilization were deemed essential to success. The state recognized the importance of the connection between the home and battle fronts. In order to facilitate that connection, the bureaucratic tic known as the Field Service Post Card was developed. Meant to relieve troops of the guilt caused by delinquent letter-writing, the postcard boiled the soldierly existence down to the barest of essentials. Fussell contends that this post card "has the honor of being the first widespread exemplar of that kind of document which uniquely characterizes the modern world: the 'Form.'"¹⁴ Use of a form, especially in lieu of intimate letters, fosters a "uniform identity of human creatures" — another crisis wrought by modernity. The card informed soldiers that "NOTHING is to be written on this side except the date and signature of the sender. Sentences not required may be erased. If anything else is added the post card will be destroyed."¹⁵ Censorship is clearly at work here. The remaining options for the soldier on the card were limited:

- I am quite well.
- I have been admitted into hospital either (sick or wounded), status either (going on well or hope to be discharged soon.)

- I am being sent down to the base.
- I have received your letter, telegram or parcel.
- Letter follows at first opportunity.
- Or I have received no letter from you (lately or for a long time).

British pluck resides in the text; a soldier is never simply well, but quite well. And the opportunity for ironic soft-pedaling of real tragedy exists aplenty in the card — information regarding hospital admittance leaves no room for the possibilities of shellshock or infection or amputation or pending death; all that is left is enforced jovial fortitude at the prospects for full recovery.¹⁶

As the years of the war progressed, Currin sent these cards to Philbrook. And as Currin's writing became more limited and bureaucratic, his texts revealed ever less of the Hike within.

The Sense of Introspection

The devil here is in the details of his writing. Two anecdotal examples — of birthday greetings and American extravagances — help to make the point. In 1915, Edith sends Hike birthday greetings and he responds in his next letter: *"July 2nd was my natal day, all right...which seeing, I bethought myself and said, 'Young man, art aware 'tis a New Year's sun?' and answered myself surprisedly 'Aye, lad, aye.'...I'm a quarter of a century old and not killed yet. Brethren, let us gather around and hope for the best."* A year later, Edith's birthday wishes elicit a very different response: *"It's a little later in point of time and that's all the difference I can think of. When did I write to you before this? — I confess I don't know as one grows old one forgets...Speaking of birthdays, how the dickens do you know when I celebrate another year gone to that hall of useless relics, memory. I swear I never proclaimed it."* Birthday 1916 clearly is not greeted like the New Year's sun, nor is Edith greeted with much other than weariness.

As for American habits, in an April 1915 letter to Edith he writes, *"So, you have motor rides and manage to keep pleasantly stimulated, then? That's well, dear friend. A little gentle excitement of some sort is an excellent thing."* But in a remarkable letter at the end of that year, he chides Philbrook: *"So you went to Paris, and returned? Truly an event, dear friends. Permit me to offer my felicitations, and upon the rest of your Victrola amused generation. Happy is the peo-*

ple [not in mourning], you know." He reproaches Philbrook and the home she represents; in the same letter he again seems to be in a battle against himself — but this time without the hijinx found in the earlier description of Lancelot Gobbo. By the winter of 1915-1916, his writing is more intensely and painfully introspective. In discussing his siblings, he writes, *"I detest rising similarities to myself in [my] sister, do you know, and have the grace to feel shame and sorrow over my own idiotic (and lengthy) adolescence."* He compares this contentious relationship with his sister to his bond with his much-loved brother: *"He is a real lad, that, and I find that I like him. Or I think I do. Perhaps everything is a delusion."*

This sort of uncertainty is echoed in the way he both approaches and talks about writing. In his earlier letters, his descriptions are vivid — writing of battle as he attends his cannon, issuing a description of a gas attack, providing an extended dialogue on the virtues of duty versus pleasure. But by the end of 1915, when asked to contribute poems to an alumni newsletter, he balks. I quote at length from a letter to Edith dated 29 December 1915:

...Who said "pomes"?— certainly this excursion into manual labor provoketh no muse to rise in me. Who shall sing the glory of mud, or tell the valor of men who live therein-- and do little else? And if there should be uncertain star for us, who am I to make recital of its shining for the easy interest of tame folk who stop at home? That is how I should like to answer a request received tonight from one C.H. Read of Baum Boulevard, Pittsburgh-- how the deuce could one live in a place with such a name?-- stating that "our class letter will be published about Feb. 1 and you should give us a very interesting letter". Indeed! Give him a dime to buy bread with, if he were starving, maybe-- but tell him and other tame folk what I am given to know and feel?

And if I told him...they would shrug their lack of interest and forget all about it before the next time to go to a restaurant for their dinner.

Moral:-- When convinced of the value of your prophetic [sic] mission in this life, buy twine to stop your mouth and don't unsew it for 100 years. And dig to the dirt for your own potatoes. Hang the rest of the world. They wouldn't know what was in your most prophetic "pomes" if they bot 'em,

once they were read...

Moral No II (of all this vapouring)-- When you've really something to say you don't say it. Or, out of empty heads cometh a multitude of words. I desire to spare words-- do you believe it?--

(It is worth contrasting this to the yearbook entry that notes, "When he doesn't display his English, the sun rises not.")

Is the inference sufficiently clear? In any case, pome me no pomes, and expect no pomes from me...

And yet, Currin next does the opposite, offering a prose poem which sets his stage, though all in the 3rd person. Currin adopts a distanced narrative in which he himself is protagonist.

[Scene: Billet in tents on Belgian Frontier. Drivers and gunners in Canadian Field Artillery service going, or gone, to bed, wooden, hard therefore, and none too wide, four about a tent-pole. W.J.C., an unknown phrophet, seated on edge of his bed, scribbling in a small note book rough and uneven lines, by the light of three stubs of candles...]

Seven paragraphs of such scene setting...until Currin interrupts the play:

... It really wouldn't be so hard — but who wants to make even "prose pomes", when you're the chap inside the "bally tent", scribbling with the three candles guttering in front of you, and blown upon from without by the dull spite of the obstinate winter rain?... No, no, kind friend at home, it's too moving a picture of your own misery to be comfortable doing. So leave it at this and be content with knowing you have actually hereby had more words written to you than I've strung together to any (1) girl, (2) fellow, or (3) relative or friend, for the last month and more: certainly more descriptive adjectives than I will think of again 'for the duration of the war.'

And still the letter doesn't close. The 'unknown prophet' instead breaks out of his narrative and extends his gaze to unspecified future readers:

'Commentators and bibliographers are free to arrange any theory of this present writer, from observation of above...'

The Writer and The War: R. I. P.

The invitation to such commentators, bibliographers — perhaps historians — was unspeakably moving to



A plaque commemorating Currin is found in the vestibule at the entrance of the Doane Academy Building, to the right of the main door as one exits the building.

me as I read the letter eighty years later in a nook on the seventh floor of Doane Library. Currin wrestles with the text in this missive, and in doing so, he grapples with his own mortality. Is the December 1915 letter an exercise in playwriting, poetry, or correspondence? Or is it a prescient summons to the future?

Currin might once have had an idea that he would capture the war on paper; he has a writer's instinct for his subject, an instinct honed by his various editorial posts at Denison. He sets his scenes — even to the point of giving stage directions. It is sorrowfully absorbing for the reader to observe how that narrative distance collapses, how Hike comes to understand that his subject is capturing him rather than the other way round. Currin's excuses for not fully engaging himself as a writer in the later letters are myriad; he says that tender nerves write rotten letters, that the "tame folk at home" would not understand, that he does not want to contribute to the "vapourizing." He writes of his setting in the third person. The author within him seems to be steadily withdrawing; as he withers, so too does Hike Currin. Melodrama is an indignity he will not indulge but through his humor. That humor is, ironically, the only escape from the trenches. Still, it seems even the dark wit cannot sustain itself on so very little.

Currin's last letters are replete with the irony, sadness, and a rupturing break from the adventurous quest which sent him to Europe. He does not live to see what Fussell and other historians have termed the modern,

but his voice as revealed in these letters shows that the a domain of optimism, expectation, and a certain innocence is a place to which neither he nor the West will ever return.

Near the end of his war, Currin closed a letter to Lily Bell Sefton with the following: *“As I seem to be good at dodging bullets, and as the blessed old Allies are having a turn now, some bright morning, I may walk into the laboratory and say, ‘Good morning. I used to be Hike Currin, you know.’”* A man — no longer Hike — could not dodge those bullets forever. He never greeted that lab good morning again.

Instead, in November 1917, Currin was killed while attending his gun in the crossfire after the 3rd Battle of Ypres and before the Battle of Cambrai. Laid to rest alongside fellow Canadian soldiers, Currin’s epitaph reads: *“Say not good night, but in some brighter clime, bid me good morning.”*

With the help of the British Commonwealth War Graves Commission, in the summer of 2000, my husband and I were able to locate Currin’s grave in Ypres. The impeccably maintained cemetery lies in a city block not far from the grand Guildhall in the center of town. When we visited Hike’s resting place, I paid particular attention to the setting, because Currin himself so often wrote about the natural vistas that surrounded him, even when in the trenches. One of his favorite subjects was the elms of Flanders. In spring 1915, he writes of the *“elm trees out in thin green leaf”*; in the December 1915 tent scene described earlier, he notes *“a row of tall Flemish elms, with bushy, leafless, tops, following the road”*; in 1916 he describes a cemetery in which *“two elm trees stand together – a path to the dressing station between them and the white crosses...scattered on this side and the other side of the path”*; and finally, he sees in the Flemish elms a rebuttal to the war through which he lives and dies: *“Well! The smashing and the drilling of gunfire makes a bigger racket than the sprouting elms, but the elms last longer.”*

Currin rests under beautiful, leafy trees. I so wanted those trees to be elms. But my botanist colleagues tell me that the best that they can say is that Currin rests under an elm-like tree; not an elm. And perhaps that is okay; for the past does not yield its poetry so easily.

A Note of Appreciation

I would like to express my gratitude to Ann Lowder of Robbins Hunter Museum and Don Schilling of the



Currin’s grave is located in Ypres, Belgium. The impeccably maintained cemetery lies in a city block not far from the grand Guildhall in the center of town.

Granville Historical Society who put together the terrific series and collection of exhibits of which this essay originally was a part. This project also owes a special debt of burden to two Denison archivists: Heather Lyle, who has worked with me earlier this year, and Florence Hoffman, Archivist Emerita, who led me to the collection of letters discussed in this essay. I consider this project a joint venture of Flo’s and mine.

— Catherine Dollard, Department of History, Denison University

FOOTNOTES

¹ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and the Making of Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford, 1975), 8.

² *Ibid.*, 18.

³ *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, videocassette, directed by Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones (Burbank, CA: Tristar Home Entertainment, 2001 [orig. 1975]).

⁴ Ian Drury, *Verdun 1916: ‘They Shall Not Pass’* (New

Deer trouble

Contributed by Alan Huggins
Historical Society volunteer

In the 1830s, the area which includes what is now Wildwood Park was owned and farmed by Samuel Mower. In 1908 Mower's grandson, Peter Richards, wrote in a letter to *The Granville Times* about a deer that had lived on the farm.

"As long as the animal was a young and spotted fawn, it was a beautiful and pretty pet and plaything, but of course had to be protected from dogs and looked after very carefully. It was permitted to come into town (the Mower farm was about half a mile west of the village) with the owner who protected it from all enemies. And even after it became large enough to get away and come to town alone, people were not afraid to approach it and caress and fondle it, and were always glad to see it. But after it got its growth, and its antlers were grown, we all soon learned that the better part of valor was to give it a wide berth. But it was not always Mr. Deer's pleasure to allow us as wide a berth as we desired and when it was known that he had escaped his corral, and which was not an infrequent occurrence, people kept their eyes open for a convenient shelter. But the best and strongest fence that could be made would not hold him unless he was carefully watched. In fact, he became the terror of the town, and his owner was obliged to put a period to his existence, which was done, and the town's people then breathed easier. He was a handsome fellow and much admired at a great distance. His end was to be eaten by those who were fortunate enough to get a slice of the venison."

York: Osprey, 2001).

⁵ Lily Bell Sefton, "The Home Leave" *Denison Alumni Bulletin* 9, no. 2 (1918): 4.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ "The First Denison Blood" *Denison Alumni Bulletin* 9, no. 2 (1918): 13.

⁸ The plaque can be found in the vestibule at the entrance of the Doane Academy Building, to the right of the main door as one exits the building.

⁹ *Denison Alumni Bulletin*, 9, no. 2 (1918): 1.

¹⁰ *Adytum*, 1913: 35.

¹¹ All correspondence with Philbrook found in the William J. Currin file, Denison Archives. Sefton material derived from the following volumes of the *Denison Alumni Bulletin*: March, 1916; June, 1917; January, 1918.

¹² *Adytum*, 1913: 35.

¹³ Fussell, *Great War*, 183.

¹⁴ Ibid., 185.

¹⁵ Ibid., 184.

¹⁶ Ibid., 185.



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