

Letters from Canada

As the Cunard liner SS.ANDANIA sailed away from Liverpool at 5.10p.m. on Thursday March 28, 1914 John Jeffry Nicholls started a 12 page letter, recognising that he would not be able to post it until stepping ashore in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

*"My dear Mother, Father, Sisters, Brothers, etc, etc,
I am going to try and write a few lines each day to tell you of my experience in crossing the
"Herring Pond" for the first time.*

Left Liverpool at 5.10pm, had dinner at 7.15 (this being the second sitting) did good justice to a fine meal, although I like several others at the table, did not quite understand the menu card, but simply pointed to the card each time, until the bottom was eventually reached."

He records daily life aboard and the meal where he shared his cabin with two others who soon succumbed to seasickness. *"In fact all the cabins around are echoing forth most queer sounds, it is pitiful to behold."*

The ship called at Queenstown, anchoring to pick up and discharge passengers and luggage before resuming the passage. As they moved ahead again, he was the next to suffer as the weather and sea were rougher on Saturday morning. *"My word it is rough, I thought the sea outside the Warren was rough but what a difference, every wave appears like a mountain, and the waves continue to break over the top deck.*

We are now in the 'Devil's Hole' as one of the Stewards told me and it takes two days to get through, and there are no prospects of any better weather."

Sunday *"Woke up feeling very seedy, the steward brings a cup of tea and biscuit which I manage to get down. Go down to breakfast, ask for something I fancy but cannot manage it....Feeling very sick and again (Whoops it comes again). Take a walk around deck but feel very queer. One of my pals wishes he was dead and wants the boat to turn around, or that he could be transferred to some other boat."*

Monday, *"Wake up feeling topping and did good justice to my breakfast, feeling very fit."*

Tuesday, *"Feeling very fit still, get up on deck first thing and see the MAURETANIA just in sight, it comes up at tremendous speed and in less than an hour is running parallel with us and about an hour later only the funnels can be seen. Our boat is beginning to roll again and the wind to spring up. The waves are flying over the front of the MAURETANIA. "*

Wednesday they ran into another storm and it was so bad that the three cabin mates laid the mattresses on the floor to sleep as the rolling and pitching made it dangerous to lie in the bunks.

Thursday "Wake up feeling very fit after our sleep on the floor. When the steward arrives with the tea & biscuits he seems rather surprised but says nothing only to the fact that he hope we've had a good night.' They spent the day playing games aboard ship.

Friday he remarks on his daily meals; "*This is more or less my menu, 1st thing cup of tea and biscuit, Breakfast 8.30, porridge, 2 boiled eggs, marmalade & an orange or apple. 11 o'clock, cup of beef tea and a biscuit. Luncheon 1 p.m. Soup, roast mutton or beef and vegetables, cold meat, pudding and collar an apple or orange. 4p.m., cup of tea, bread and butter and piece of cake. Dinner, 7p.m., Soup, roast duck usually, apples & custard, ice cream and an apple. 9p.m., Mustard and cress sandwiches.*"

Saturday "perfectly calm & steady, no rolling or dipping.....find the air very cold....a little snow begins to fall about 9a.m." He also records from the ship's log the daily distance travelled, which averages just over 300 miles at a speed of 12 ½ knots, no doubt accounting for the sight of *MAURETANIA travelling at speed*.

"Hoping to get to Halifax about midnight and land in the morning....Work is my next thought and work I will get whatever it may be."

He wrote "*Dear Mother and Father,*" on letter paper from the Cunard liner SS.ANDANIA on Tuesday April 7th that they had arrived in Halifax, Nova Scotia, on the previous Saturday. He took a train with a fellow-traveller to Montreal. "*We left Monday morning at 8a.m., and arrived Tuesday morning at 8.30a.m.*" There had been a snowfall and he noted the poor condition of roads. "*Our yard at home is a rug to it as regards cleanliness.*' He "*saw about 20 birds between Halifax and Montreal which is 847 miles, all one sort & exactly like our rooks*". In Montreal he tried to get work with the Canadian Pacific Railway, trying different departments but no jobs were available. He tried for a job with the Sanitary Department at City Hall without any prospect of work. He was getting a train to Toronto that evening in the hope of finding work as 'a waiter, coachman, or work on a farm for a few weeks.'

April 12th, 1914, he wrote from 331 Church Street, Toronto, to his parents about his efforts to obtain work, by waiting for the daily paper to appear and scanning 'vacancies' to rush for the prospect of an interview before others.

April 19th, 1914, he wrote to his sister, Violet Ann Nicholls, "*Dear Viv,...Well to-o be-e shure (this is a favourite expression) we did have a jolly rough time on board.... I thought it was all up once...and I shook as a leaf for quite five minutes after the shock. It was on Wednesday evening in the midst of the gale when suddenly the boat went over from side to side for quite a dozen times & got lower & lower each time and I had the trouble in the world to keep still on the floor, my word, I thought I had seen my last days and I think there were quite a few others like me and a few a trifle worse.*"

April 26th, 1914 he wrote again to his parents about his continuing search for work and the cost of living on a small budget. He met a Mr Aldington in one of the offices and "he comes from Teignmouth and he is going to try and do what he can for me." There was also the prospect of work in an architect's office in a week or two.

May 1st, 1914 he wrote to Viv, about his change of rooms to 294 Gerrard Street where the rent was less and the room was better. He spent time with the Hacking family on Sunday and then, with them, a visit to the Niagara Falls. He is also in work at last, and signs the five page letter "*Your ever loving brother Jonathan*".

May 3rd, from 124 Bond Street, he wrote to his parents to tell them of his job, at last, in an architect's office as a tracer.

May 10th, from 14 Gore Street, he wrote to his parents, his sister Viv, his older sister Margaret and her husband Sid, and to Grace, another sister. Each letter is picking on items personal to the recipient and not at all repetitive.

Eliza Margaret Nicholls had married Sidney Booth, a clergyman, and moved to New York, but was once more in England when John Nicholls moved to Canada. They returned to USA and lived in Waterville, Maine in 1924, and had a son John.

Violet Ann Nicholls was born on 2 July 1894. She married Stanley L Ramus, an uniform manufacturer in 1924, and was living at 9 Calais Gate, Lambeth in 1939. She died in December 1964, aged 70 (GRO ref Battersea, London, vol 5c, p 81)

Elizabeth Grace Nicholls married Sydney G Heywood on 10 June June 1914 (report in Western Times of 11 June, 1914). She became a member of the Red Cross VAD Devon 52 unit and was married with a Red Cross guard of honour at Cofton St Mary.

William Hudson Nicholls (Willie) married Mabel Lena Holbrook on 25 November 1916 at the Register Office, Newton Abbot. He was 29 and she was 22. They had a daughter, Lena Ann Nicholls at Eastdon Farm on 2 January 1928. William took over the family farm and was running it by the time of his father's death in May 1923. It appears that they also offered holiday accommodation into the 1930's. (Starcross History Group)

May 17th, in a letter to his parents, he mentions letters received from members of his family and that he wrote "*only fifteen letters and postcards on Sunday ..as it rained all day Sunday.*" Tommy Johnston appears in a number of letters and it may be an old friend who had also moved to Canada ahead of him. "*I usually go up to Tommy's two or three times a week and of course we have a bit of music on the piano or the gramophone and sing some of the old songs together, and all three of us have very musical voices so you may guess its musical melody with a vengeance, but its fun and enjoyment and what odds the row?*"

May 18th to Viv, an account of his dealings with bed-bugs, "*not a very nice subject.*" It seems that in each of the rooms he rented he was attacked, and it led to his rapid changes of address.

May 31st from 294 Gerrard Street to his parents, "What an awful shipping disaster the sinking of the Empress of Ireland was, it was pitiful to see the women and men around the C.P.R. office here, both sexes crying bitterly and losing utter control of themselves." (RMS Empress of Ireland was an ocean liner that sank near the mouth of the Saint Lawrence River following a collision in thick fog with the Norwegian collier SS Storstad in the early hours of 29 May 1914. The Storstad penetrated 15 feet into the *Empress of Ireland's* starboard side, and the vessel sunk within 14 minutes, drowning 1,012 of its passengers and crew.)

Telling them of his encounter with bed-bugs, "I have 18 bites on one arm, 8 on the other, 19 on my neck and face, mostly on my face, and three on my back. ..Well, itching I never had such itching in all my life before..This is over two pages on bed-bugs and perhaps by the time you have read about them you will also be getting the creeps but you haven't any at Eastdon thanks be."

It would appear that John Nicholls wrote letters home on a daily basis whenever possible, but only a selection survive. His sister Grace was married on 10th June 1914.

June 21st, 1914 he wrote to Viv, wishing her a happy birthday on 2nd July, her 20th. He had just received new drawing instruments from Stanleys in London and felt resentful that customs duty of 4 dollars and 26 cents had been charged. He asked for his tennis racket to be sent tied in a bit of linen, which might cost "a shilling I guess. ...I think I shall have to join some tennis club or another as far as I can see this will be the only way of getting to know a few good class people."

July 12th to his parents, comparing the view from his office window to that from Eastdon across to the Warren.

August 1st, 1914 "Dear Mother and Father,

I guess I was rather lazy again last week and failed to write to anyone at home, and am just wondering when and if this letter will reach you on account of the very probable war. I am very excited about it as also everybody else in the city appears to be. For the last three days the papers have been printing five to six extra editions.

I am hoping that England will go to war and wipe Germany off the face of the earth, and if occasion calls I think I shall join too as I am dead against Germany."

"Last Sunday it was scorching and it is the first time I have really felt the heat....and the sun even took the skin off my face a thing I never thought would happen to my skin, but I suppose it was really my fault for I lay down on the beach from 10 in the morning till 4.30 in the afternoon."

He also remarks on the state of corn and oats in nearby fields and asks "How are our crops looking?".

August 8th, 1914 to Viv, "I should just like to pop back again for a day or two and see all the goings on in "little" England, no doubt there are troops around our neighbourhood! I am very glad the war has come for I could never see how it could be averted, and especially now, as it is now that we have the advantage. Tell Jimmy (Lucas) I should like to be home to rub it into him for he is sure to be a pro-German now as he was a pro-Boer."

"People here seem to lack enthusiasm at any rate they fail to show it. At the band concerts here the band plays from 8 till 10 and during the whole time you would not hear a score of claps, although there would be quite 700 or 800 people present and some of the pieces are very fine."

"I'll bet Len Shapter is having a good time now, just in his glory scouting round with his motor bike. I went up one day last week to enlist but they had received no orders from the Government for volunteers at that time....The papers are simply sold like wildfire and I guess it is good for that trade if no other. I waited for the 1st war extra that was published last Monday morning 1a.m., since then we get about six extras a day. The Belgians are doing a bit of slaughtering!!" (The Germans invaded Belgium and the next four years saw many towns and villages and their inhabitants wiped off the face of the earth. Many refugees fled to Holland (a neutral) and across the Channel to England.)

He describes a picnic outing with friends and mentions others clearly known to his sister at home. "Last Sunday I met a fellow called Samuels with Finch, he is from Exeter and knows Willie very well he said.....again, last Wednesday when I was coming home from business, who should I run up against in the street but a girl from Dawlish called May Shapley, Willie will know, she used to run about with Kettle who was in Churchward's office with Harry Hartwill, the world is very small you see."

It seems that John moved away from Toronto and took work on a farm for the next surviving letter is from c/o Mr J.Wood, Kilbride P.O., Ontario.

November 8th to Father & Mother,

"I note from the papers that only 15,000 are required for the 2nd contingent and these have been mobilized, so presume I shall still have to wait a while before my turn comes which I guess will not be till after Christmas now....

Hurrah! This is what I shouted after we finished the mangolds on Friday afternoon, instead of two days it took us four more....He had in about 2 ½ acres he says and it was such a fine crop and of course with only the boss and myself to pull and draw in it took a little while. We drew in more than 40 box wagon load (just over 50 ton we calculated). I pulled a good 1 ½ acres as I started before him mornings....I used to give them the "highland fling". I used to see Smale do them this way, hence how I knew how to do it....

Started apple picking yesterday, this is a peach of a job to mangold pulling."

After descriptions of learning to milk cattle and other life on the farm he ends, "Feeling well (what, what) this is the life."

On November 30th 1914 the letter comes from Section C, 4th Field Ambulance A.M.C., Mobilization Camp, No 2 Division, Toronto, to his sister Viv. It appears that he had enlisted on November 21st and was undergoing initial training. He now has a uniform and the 'sheds' are clean and warm, and food plentiful. One attack of food poisoning affected 240 of the 250 in camp and it was put down to the cook who was sacked. It appears that cooking utensils had not been properly cleaned.

No further letters exist from this source.

War Diary of No 5 Canadian Field Ambulance, B.E.F.

From Sains-les-Marquion, about 10 km west of Cambrai, October 12th 1918.

Dull weather. An attack was launched in the early morning from 2000 yards in front of IWUY (*about 6 km north east of Cambrai*), which met with practically no opposition, and very few casualties passed through this ambulance.

Albeit it was a disastrous day as far as this unit was concerned. The Officer Commanding, Major J.F.Burgess, Capt F.Clark, with two motor ambulances, was making the round of the posts. At 6th Field Ambulance post they stopped and were conversing with Capts. MacNeill and Parker when a shell came over, landing between the two cars. Eleven casualties resulted, Capt. MacNeill being killed, Capt. A.A.Parker severely wounded in the head (since died of wounds), Lt.Co.D.P.Kappele, D.S.O. was wounded in thigh and arm, Major J.F.Burgess in left arm, Capt. Clark in left forearm, The two drivers were also hit, Lyne in the right arm, and Murphy between the thighs. Pte.Stanley, car orderly, was severely wounded in abdomen and left foot, (since died of wounds); **Pte. Nicholls, one of the guides, was wounded in the pelvis, and died on the way to the Corps Main Dressing Station.** Pte. Gordon, the other guide was hit in the thighs. Dvr. Lyne showed great fortitude and devotion to duty. He was made a stretcher case but on learning that there was no one to drive the ambulance down, he voluntarily was placed on the driver seat and instructed an N.C.O. how to drive until the Dressing Station was reached. The casualties were evacuated immediately.

Of the original officers who came to France with the unit, only Major Elliott is left. The unit was more or less depressed as a whole when the above casualties became known.