

ARTHUR'S GIFT

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OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

When I first met Arthur Roberts, I was writing a novel about a war historian. I needed to give her something juicy to investigate while she was sorting out her love life. Arthur's diaries were the perfect distraction. Reader, I abandoned that novel long ago. But Arthur's story has stayed with me.

A bad novelist introduces her characters through old photos so let me show you some photos of Arthur. All through his life he's been a snappy dresser. Even in his enlistment photo, his uniform is crease-free, his boots shine like mirrors and his regimental cap is worn at just the right angle. Arthur is smiling, looking straight at the camera, happy to be off to war. An older Arthur, on holiday in Blackpool, is wearing the latest fashions: pinstriped flannel trousers, Argyle-patterned tank top and gleaming white lace-up shoes. He is still facing the camera but there are no smiles any more.

Just in case I've confused you, Arthur is a real person. He was born in Bristol and when he was a child, he moved with his father to Glasgow. Before he volunteered to fight in the trenches, he lived in Anderston. Staying on beyond school-leaving age, it seems he was a gifted pupil. His talents included speaking French, drawing and playing the bugle. The neighbours in Anderston would have cheered when he joined up and the screechy-squawky bugle practice came to an end. Arthur records his progress towards the western front in spidery copperplate handwriting. In his diary, he lists every place he passes through and what he does there.

May 25 – 3 June, Etaples (T)

June 4 – 8, Poperinghe (R)

9 – 15 June, Ypres (FL)

T = training

R = rest

FL = front line

Arthur is making his way towards Passchendaele, one of the most dreadful battles in history. Even before he gets there, conditions must be hellish but Arthur is still the cool young man from the photograph. He enjoys watching the 'fireworks' coming from the German trenches and is eager to get stuck in. When his first chance to go on a raid is postponed, he says that he is disappointed. The battle of Messines disappoints him too. Arriving on the 9th of June, after days of heavy casualties, Arthur expects the battlefield to look like a war painting. But there aren't enough craters or dead bodies for his liking. He takes his place on a frontline trench and an officer instructs him to fire at anyone who looks German. Arthur replies that this won't be difficult. Back in Anderston, he was acquainted with German barbers and waiters.

I can't believe what I'm reading. In the midst of death and despair, Arthur is insouciant. Why does he have no fear? Is he some kind of psychopath? And then, on a rest day, everything changes. He is strolling through a deserted trench, hoping to find a quiet spot where he can kill the lice on his uniform. Turning a corner, he finds a private the same age as himself, blown to pieces by a shell. It is a sight he will never forget, he assures us, describing his horror in unflinching detail. The boy has become a man.

All that summer, horror is commonplace for Arthur. Life and death are a matter of sheer luck. During heavy fighting at Zillebeke he is separated from his battalion. He takes refuge from the shelling in a German trench and admires its wicker lining. Back at base, he is assigned to stretcher duty. Searching for casualties in knee-deep mud, he is separated from his comrades again. It takes him two days of slipping and sliding to find them. The rain is as lethal as enemy fire. It has turned the battlefield into a carnivorous monster.

It's the rain that ends Arthur's war. He contracts trench foot and struggles on until the end of October. But he is no longer fit to serve on the front line. Instead, he will carry out guard duties in camp and wake up the battalion with his bugle. Arthur is less than happy about this. All his life he has dreamed of the military – the marching, the uniforms, even the bugle-playing. Guard duty is a boring and unglamorous task, not what he joined up for. But

he walks with a limp now and he has no other choice. Assigned to a new camp, he works in the dining hall. There are no comments, he says, thank goodness.

Soldiers aren't known for having a sensitive side. The comments Arthur fears could be about that limp. But there's something else about Arthur that makes him stand out. Nothing is known about Arthur's mother except that she came from Bristol but his father came from Trinidad. A man like Arthur will attract attention in the British army and not all of it will be positive. But the dining-hall incident is the only suggestion that he is treated differently. Whether he is dancing with local girls or serving with his comrades, he would have us believe that he is treated equally.

We know that Arthur re-wrote his diaries because he tells us so. But did he leave anything out? He loved the army and it would have broken his heart if he experienced discrimination. Maybe there were comments cast in his direction. And maybe he chose to ignore them.

Millions of men returned from the war but they would never be the same. There were no counsellors to tell them how to go on living. On the surface, Arthur's life was orderly. He came back to Glasgow and worked as an engineer. He married twice but never had children. His last days were spent in a care home in Cardonald and an argument with another resident may have given rise to his memory box. Asked what he had ever done with his life, Arthur became contemplative.

Arthur had no descendants so he left the box to his solicitor. Twenty years later, when the solicitor died and his house was sold, a box was found in the attic and inside it was Arthur. His life story was told just how he wanted it.

Helen Lyttle's work has previously appeared in Open Book's Unbound, Rejection Lit and The Sunday Times. She has never discovered something interesting in an attic.