

In *Canada: A Portrait in Letters 1800-2000*, Charlotte Gray weaves together hundreds of letters written by Canadians over the course of two centuries. Here, we have selected two very different love letters from ordinary Canadians, from two very different times . . .

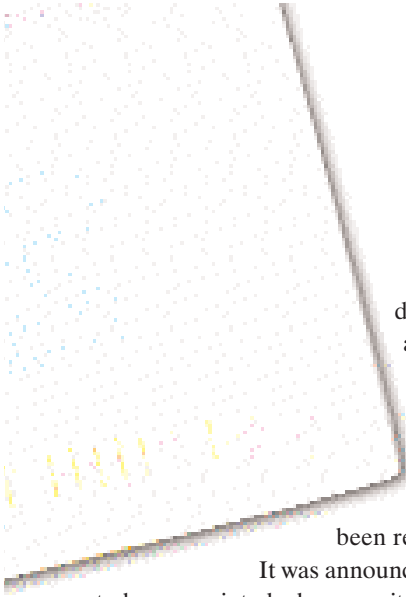
1942: ONTARIO
NORAH EGENER TO FRED EGENER IN EUROPE

More than a million men and women, one-tenth of Canada's population, served in the armed forces during the Second World War. For newlyweds such as Norah and Fred Egener, the war involved long separation. During their first seven years of marriage, they spent only two and a half years under the same roof. While Fred trained in England and saw action in Italy and Holland, Norah established a home for their two infants near Owen Sound, Ontario. But each ached with loneliness and longing for the other. They exchanged hundreds of intimate letters in which they confessed their depressions and tried to give each other courage and hope.

June 15

Fred dearest:

. . . I am now at the cottage . . . Mom and Dad were down yesterday and took Marg [her aunt] back up town for a week, so I am alone with the children [Waide and Cynthia] and the maid. It is the first time I have had them alone since Cynthia was born, and it is a real treat . . .



I am quite prepared to take that rolling pin to you dear if you ever go away again. Seriously though, I guess as you say we are putting things more into their proper perspective. Darling, I want you to understand one thing—inside I’m not measuring up to my problems and this awful separation as well as you might think. I resent it lots of times, hate everything and everyone, even the children . . . I can truthfully say I have not been really happy since you went away.

It was announced in yesterday’s paper that all men up to thirty-five are to be conscripted—however it was not settled and Quebec may still balk.

Glad to hear you are on the wagon. If you fall off dear, don’t worry about me not understanding. Fred dear, I’ll understand anything you do and I won’t blame you . . .

On the twelfth, last Friday, it was a year since I said good-bye to you in Hamilton. What a day and what a dreadful drive, back to London. But what a day when you return! . . . Darling, I appreciate your words of praise and declarations of love. Many a time when we lived in Toronto, I must confess I often wondered if you really loved me. You very seldom told me—but you were always very sweet to me and loved me as if you loved me, but never before have you told me quite how much I mean to you.

Darling, in these two letters you are very depressed and lonely, as I was in a couple that crossed yours. I may be mistaken, but I have a feeling you’ve done something that is worrying you and you want to get it off your chest, so to speak, to me but you don’t know quite how to do it? Am I right? . . . I understand quite well when you said, “damned if I did not think I’d blow a fuse soon”. I had the same feeling all winter. I’m just now beginning to be a bit normal . . .

Biologically a man is supposed to be different from a woman. Remember Napoleon and his femmes du guerre? Oh hell, what I’m trying to say is, if it would relieve the tension any, get yourself a girl for a night. I know one thing though, you won’t feel much better because you are so constituted that you have to love the girl to whom you make love, and the girl you love happens to be me and I’m too far away.

Seriously dear, I really don’t believe it is such a terrible sin. The tragedy would come if you had more than a physical experience—if your mind and heart and soul entered into it, like it did when you and I made love.

Fred dear, maybe I’m away off the track—please tell me if I am or not. And if you have anything to confess, please do so if it would make you feel better. I’ve felt better ever since I made my little confession, but maybe on the other hand it has worried you . . . Never hesitate to write me, no matter what kind of mood you’re in—I certainly unburden my troubles to you, sweet . . .

Norah

Fred was wounded in action in Italy but returned safely to Canada in 1945.



People write letters when they are separated from loved ones by emigration or wars, or when they are desperate for help in poverty and famine. They write letters when they are lonely, or in love. And for the most part, they write about the texture of their daily lives, rather than the achievements of politicians or leaders.

**CHARLOTTE GRAY,
INTRODUCTION, CANADA:
A PORTRAIT IN LETTERS**



EXCERPT CANADA: A PORTRAIT IN LETTERS



1999: BRITISH COLUMBIA JIMMIE TO JANE FROST IN VANCOUVER

Of all the love letters I read during my research, this is the one that moved me most. This is in part because of the recipient's circumstances. Jane Frost was recovering from chemotherapy following a second episode of breast cancer, when she received a phone call out of the blue. It was a particularly low point in Jane's life. She was alone and frightened; all her hair had fallen out; she was grey with fatigue. A couple of days later, this letter from the caller arrived, explaining what had prompted the call.

The Coast Plaza Suite Hotel
1763 Comox Street
Vancouver B.C., Canada
June 5, 1999

Dear Jane,

There is a marvellous Canadian named Alice Munro who writes for the *New Yorker*. Her stories usually begin with something odd, like the phone call you received from me Thursday afternoon; a confusing chat with someone you never knew and only shared a few words with very long ago. Munro's stories usually get around to instinct, to things lost and things regained. It was in this spirit that I sat down in a sunny garden in San Francisco and finally made the call I wanted to make thirty years ago. I hope I can explain myself.

1965-66, the year I spent in Vancouver followed one where I had had my face disfigured after going through a windshield in a car wreck. I arrived at St. George's [School] determined not to be what I had been, an unread jock and make-out artist from a very small place. I threw myself, literally, into rugby and trying to memorize every word that had come out of Great Britain. At the same time I was bludgeoned with the narcissism of most 17 year-olds, compounded every time I looked in the mirror at my freshly plastic-surgoned face.

That was the boy-man who, in late October, was finally invited to check out of the school on a Saturday night, to attend a real city party, with strong beer and wealthy, lovely girls . . . My new friends even supplied me with a date who did not find the tongue-tied sack of neuroses she had been paired with quite to her liking. Not long after entering the party, she fled into the dancing arms of a Leslie Howard look-alike.



CANADA: A PORTRAIT IN LETTERS EXCERPT

It was about that time that you appeared, came over, and actually talked to me.

Given your current struggles you might find it hard to remember what a truly radiant young woman you were. The Jane I met had a classic New World beauty I'm sure people have remarked on all your life. That said, your real power came from your kindness. You spoke to me for a very long time. You told me about Vancouver, about ignoring the appearance of status in the room; you asked me about the beach where I grew up and—thankfully not avoiding it—where the scar that ran across my forehead had come from. When you finally rejoined whomever it is people rejoin in these situations, I felt about as good as it gets.

I left the party and the dancing couple and walked a very long way back to school where I spent the rest of a majestic, lonely year. I worked hard at a lot of things, including the courage to call you, to get on the bus and share some English tea in your English city. I believe it was towards the end of November that the boarders' grapevine informed me that you had become involved with the person you eventually married. It was my first lesson in lost chances, something I've learned to have no patience for.

. . . I [returned to the States and] was married myself at 36 and have two children who are the lights of my life. I live a fairly hectic life . . . trying to add to my assets and, at the same time, realize what true assets really are. I am here this weekend because I put some money [in a company here]. Truth told, I think the investment was based on other reasons. I still want to have tea with you.

I don't get nervous anymore, except in a situation calling a woman who has no reason to remember me. As I said, it wasn't ridiculous nostalgia, nor one of the misguided missiles of middle-aged men. It was a thank you, long overdue. As simple as your kindness was that night, it was something I lived on for a year.

I heard your spirit again Thursday when you said, this phone call must be very hard for you. You went on to say how you will beat your cancer. You will. But in days right now, in moments that must be so hard for you, I hope you remember the true beauty you really have. I was an incident in your life, but your heart must have been so extended for so many years that no loss of appearance will ever dim it for the people lucky enough to have known its glow.

Tonight, as you were this morning, you will be in my prayers.

Jimmie

Jane and Jimmie met a year later and picked up on the friendship that had started thirty years earlier. The letter, proving the enduring value of written rather than electronic messages, is one of Jane's greatest treasures, as her cancer remains in remission.

Charlotte Gray's book also includes letters from these well-known Canadians:

NORMAN BETHUNE

SIR ROBERT BORDEN

EMILY CARR

SIR WINSTON CHURCHILL

ROBERTSON DAVIES

JOHN DIEFENBAKER

GLENN GOULD

GREY OWL

W.L. MACKENZIE KING

PIERRE LAPORTE

MARGARET LAURENCE

SIR WILFRID LAURIER

SIR JOHN A. MACDONALD

MARSHALL MCLUHAN

L.M. MONTGOMERY

SUSANNA MOODIE

FARLEY MOWAT

EMILY MURPHY

LESTER B. PEARSON

LOUIS RIEL

TOM THOMSON

CATHARINE PARR TRAILL

