

Prisoners of War as Library Users

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One does not usually associate libraries and study classes with amenities provided for internees in Prisoner of War camps in the First World War. It was surprising then for me, as Librarian/Archivist of the Canadian War Museum, to find evidence in our Library/Archives of well-organized libraries in the First World War internment camps in Germany. My introduction to POW library users in this war came about as I was undertaking a preliminary inventory of the rich resources of the Canadian War Museum (CWM) Archives. In the CWM Archives are two files related to libraries in POW camps in Germany. One file (Accession 19800077) holds letters from 2nd Lieutenant Archibald Campbell, a Canadian, sent to his parents from his POW camp in Germany. The other file (Accession 19710056) contains information on officially sanctioned libraries in German POW camps.

These discoveries provoked the initial interest and prompted me to see as an experiment what else could be found to flesh out this theme amongst the resources contained in the CWM's archives and library. The results were sufficiently interesting, not only for demonstrating the potential of our archives/library but in elucidating this hitherto neglected theme in First World War history, as to merit being brought to the attention of the readership of this journal.

Little reference was found in the published literature to the establishment of libraries and study classes on either side of the conflict during the Great War. More information seems available on the situation in German POW Camps than in their British and Canadian counterparts, and indeed few details have come to light on the



organization of libraries in allied POW camps, although it is known that some existed.

According to Jean Laflamme in his book, *Les Camps de Détention au Québec durant la première guerre mondiale*, German and Austrian internees in Canadian camps were allowed "quelques journaux ou magazines canadiens et américains," but that hardly constituted a functioning library.¹ Old Fort Henry, holding mainly civilian internees, did have educational classes and a library, but it seems to have been the exception rather than the rule.² In fact the combined monotony and confinement in Canadian camps was acknowledged to have contributed to the mental breakdown of certain internees.³

The serious mental effects of boredom in confined quarters were of concern in the 19th century to British sea captains exploring the Arctic. They began to equip their ships with libraries and established evening study classes below decks.⁴ For related reasons, around the same time, the British Army began to establish libraries for its soldiers. "The large network of libraries, recreational centres, soldiers' homes and the like which sprang up in barracks during the latter part of the century through military and private initiative had as one of its goals the prevention of venereal disease in the army."⁵

Probably the Victorian notion that idleness could make work for the devil was still a current idea when the Great War began. With the inevitable Prisoner of War camps being established in Germany, certain British civilians began to take responsibility for the mental as well as the physical well-being of their

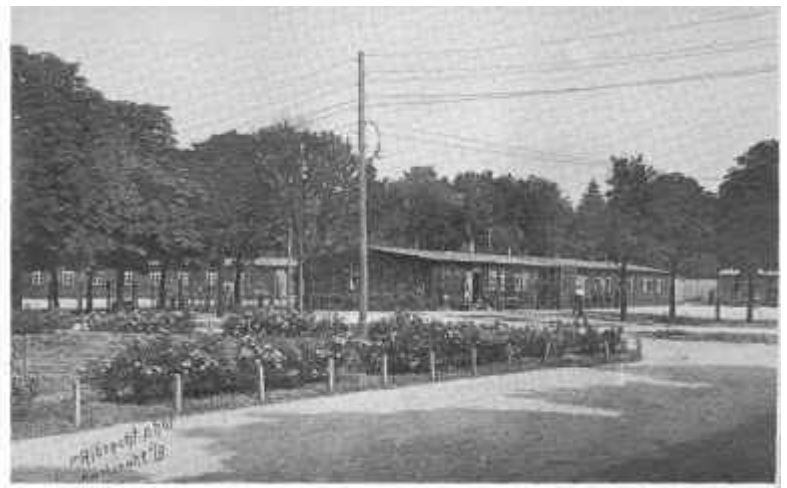


countrymen and allies who were interned in German camps.

The relief effort to provide the POWs with the necessary amenities (their needs as ascertained by neutral camp inspectors and legitimized by the Hague Convention) began almost immediately after hostilities broke out in August 1914.⁶ As a consequence, small informal libraries grew inside Prisoner of War Camps once the system for sending parcels using the International Red Cross was developed. Eventually, due to the intervention of the British Censor (Defence of the Realm Regulation 24B), only holders of special permits could forward books, magazines and other printed material. A *Circular to Postmasters* from the Canadian Post Office Department dated November 1917 specifies that the British Defence of the Realm regulations must be followed for printed material sent from Canada to Prisoners of War interned abroad.⁷ For works of fiction and other light literature, the special permit holder was the London-based clearing house on Horseferry Road called "The Camps Library." Requests from POWs for fiction were to be addressed to this agency.⁸

The Camps Library

Established by book donations from the so-called "Camps Library" foundation in Britain, individual Camp Libraries in POW



Left: POW 2nd Lieutenant Archibald Campbell at Karlsruhe Internment Camp, Germany. Here he borrowed a mathematics book from the library to help occupy his spare time. (CWM Archives)

Above: Karlsruhe Internment Camp, Germany. This is the scene depicted on a post card sent home from the camp by Campbell. On the back he had written-. "Cherio, my new home." The camp was comprised of 10 huts, of which Hut 8 was the library and recreational centre. (CWM Archives)

camps began to be well organized with catalogued collections and regular arrivals of new books. As stated in 1918 in the POW newsletter, *The British Prisoner of War: the Monthly Journal of the Central Prisoners of War Committee of the British Red Cross and Order of St. John:*

The aim and ideal of the Library is not only to supply to these unfortunate men a means of recreation and amusement, and to try and cheer a little their hours of imprisonment, but also to try and inculcate or gradually cultivate in many of them a love for good literature, and a taste for wider and more general reading, which may be of pleasure or benefit to them in after life.. And when sending to Canadians, Australians, and others from remote parts of the Empire, always when possible we include certain books which deal with their own homeland or are written by their own countrymen and which we believe they are specially glad to get.⁹

Major Peter Anderson, a Canadian officer who was confined in the Bischofswerda Camp in Germany before escaping from it, wrote that "a good many hundred books and magazines" were in his Camp Library in 1915.¹⁰ Desmond Morton mentions a library in the POW camp at Göttingen, a University town, where many of the Canadians who fought at Ypres were sent.¹¹ A *Report of Visits to English Prisoner-of-War Camps in Germany* of December 1915 states that the POWs' library in Göttingen was comprised of 7,000 books in several languages.¹² However, from much of Desmond Morton's research it appears the ordinary soldier would

not have had the time or energy left to read books after working under severe conditions.¹³ Yet, a system of "wandering libraries" existed in connection with the working camps.¹⁴ How much libraries were used as nourishment for the mind by the underfed prisoner labourers cannot be ascertained. Perhaps the idea of physical escape from the camps was more immediate than mental escape into literature.

Indeed use of the Libraries seems more prevalent amongst the officers, who did have time to read. An example is 2nd Lieutenant Archie (Archibald Bruce Duchesnay) Campbell whose letters home are stored in the CWM Archives.¹⁵ Campbell worked at the Bank of Montreal in Alberta before he joined the Royal Flying Corps in May, 1917. A year of service eventually brought him to France, to fly with No. 20 Squadron RAF. By September 1918, Campbell was a Prisoner of War in Germany, having been shot down behind enemy lines.

In Karlsruhe Camp, Germany, Campbell was a limited library user. As an officer, he was not required to spend hours on back-breaking tasks in mines or on other difficult working camp projects. Perhaps out of boredom, or perhaps out of desire to keep up his banking skills, this particular POW found his way to the Camp Library. "So you see we have an awful lot of time to spare. I found an elementary arithmetic in the library & since then have been solving easy problems."¹⁶ In Campbell's first letter home (he had earlier been reported missing in action), he asks "Dad please find out that if I return to B of M (likely I will) what salary, position, etc. I will have."¹⁷ Campbell was thinking ahead to post-war life and possibly used the POW camp library to help sustain his mental activity during his period of captivity. A photograph taken of Karlsruhe library about the time that Campbell was using its facilities shows shelves of catalogued books, several study tables, easy chairs and a notice board.¹⁸

Organizing the libraries inside some camps was a labour of love for those interested. *The British Prisoner of War* journal referred to above, which was distributed to Canadian POWs by the Canadian Red Cross Society, documents some of librarians' trials. From Clausthal, a bleak camp in Germany, Lieutenant Alec MacDonald, RAF wrote in 1918 to his parents:

I have spent five complete days...overhauling the library. It had got into a terrible state...So we recalled all the books and had a room-to-room search turning books out, and then added all the new books we had been given and sorted them all out into categories - Novels - Poetry - Biographies - History - etc., etc....We entirely re-numbered and re-catalogued them all.¹⁹

At Ruhleben, a catalogue of more than 2,000 volumes was issued as early as 1915 and sold for one mark. This library was run by former chartered accountants and they covered the library expenses by issuing fines for overdue books!²⁰

Study classes of more than recreational reading material were also organized for prisoners and this initiative came from the second form of library organization available in the camps. This library organization was known by the awkward title of "The British Prisoner of War Book Scheme (Educational)."²¹

British Prisoners of War Book Scheme (Educational)

This sophisticated library and study system supplied books and study material to most of the POW camps where British and Commonwealth POW officers and other ranks were held. From an office in the Victoria and Albert Museum, the British Prisoners of War Book Scheme (Educational) was directed under the auspices of a Committee that included Sir Alfred T. Davies of the London-based Board of Education, Alice, Countess of Bective, a Major David Davies, M.P., Oxford Professor Gilbert Murray, and the Librarian of the London Library, C.T. Hagberg Wright. The object of the Scheme was "To provide British Prisoners of War interned in enemy or neutral countries with books for purposes of study." Furthermore "Men who pursue a regular course of study, either in class or privately, are recommended to apply for, fill in and obtain authentication of a "Form of Record" of their studies, as this may be of use to them afterwards."²²

The following list shows the number of camps in different countries which the program reached:

<p>BRITISH PRISONERS OF WAR BOOK SCHEME (EDUCATIONAL)</p> <p>Founder and Hon. Director: SIR ALFRED T. DAVIES, K.B.E., C.B.</p> <p>VICTORIA & ALBERT MUSEUM, S. KENSINGTON, LONDON, S.W. 7.</p>	<p>THIS BOOK, supplied through the agency of the Scheme, is the property, BY PURCHASE OR EXCHANGE, of the undermentioned British Prisoner of War. This or any other volume, if of sufficient value to be worth returning and still in a serviceable condition, may be ultimately returned to the Office of the Book Scheme, should the owner be willing, so as to be made available for others. (Returned Prisoners, Wounded Soldiers and Sailors, etc.) who may need such books later.</p>
<p>Name & Rank.....</p> <p>Camp Address.....</p>	
<p>Register No.</p>	<p>Date</p>

Please leave this Bookplate intact.

Germany - 142 (and others); Austria-Hungary - 12; Bulgaria - 1; Holland - 8; Turkey - 20; Switzerland - 9 (and others)²³

Although Campbell's camp, Karlsruhe, is listed as having a library under the War Book Scheme (Educational), it is referred to as temporary camp for officers, and certainly it did not appear to achieve the educational status of some other camps which had good Reference Libraries and study classes in addition to Camp Libraries.²⁴ An example of the latter was Ruhleben, a large permanent camp holding civilians and military personnel. Here one of its prisoners, the renowned Canadian musician, Ernest MacMillan, worked on his Doctoral thesis in music for Oxford University. Prior to his internment, MacMillan had been a music student studying in Paris and happened to be visiting Bayreuth, Germany when war broke out.²⁵ At least seven other men interned at Ruhleben passed the London University Matriculation Examination.²⁶

The type of study and reference books needed to achieve this standard of higher education were, of course, scarce and expensive. The British Prisoner of War Book Scheme (Educational), as a charity registered under the War Charities Act 1916, made a wide appeal to the British public for books and donations of funds for purchasing books. This generosity of

Bookplate for books sent by the British Prisoners of War Book Scheme (Educational) to POWs for their study use. (CWM Archives)

spirit to deplete "their own book-shelves in order that their treasured (or discarded) volumes may minister to the wants of their more needy brethren"²⁷ resulted in the amassing of a large collection of books to be prepared by volunteers for shipment to POWs in response to their requests. The following short list shows the scope of the applications for books collected by the Committee to send to the camps: Art; Archaeology; Architecture; Agriculture; Commerce and Finance; Chemistry and Physics; Geography; Geology; History; Military History; Natural History; Law; Literature; Logic; Philosophy; Theology; Mathematics; Medicine and Surgery; Music; Navigation; Politics and Sociology; Trade.

As stated by the Committee of the British Prisoners of War Book Scheme (Educational):

Any Prisoner who is now studying, or proposing to study, during captivity with a view to presenting himself for examination by any of these Examining or Professional Bodies, and any Prisoner who is, or proposes to become, a member of these Universities, can be supplied with a Syllabus of Examination of any of the bodies with whom he hopes to have relations, and if satisfied as to his capacity to reach the required standards can enter into direct communication with them.²⁸

A much abbreviated list of the Departments, Examining Bodies, and Universities includes: Imperial College of Science and Technology; Royal Society of Art; Royal Institution of British Architects; Royal College of Music; The Institute of Chartered Accountants; Society of Engineers; The Inns of Court; Oxford University; Cambridge University; London University.

Official recognition of the War Book Scheme was given by the British War Office, Home Office and Colonial Office. Since the scheme also helped Colonial prisoners of war, recognition was also granted by the Canadian, New Zealand, Australian and Indian Governments.²⁹

The Scheme's statistics for 1917 show the astounding scope of its activity in the camps. A total of 9,650 requests for books were received

from prisoners, and 55,570 educational books sent out to 200 camps.³⁰ By July 1918, according to the *Notes of the Month*, in the *British Prisoner of War* journal, there was a huge increase in demand for technical and educational books by POWs in camps in Germany. The increased need for this type of material was attributed to the fact that:

the prisoners so largely consist of New Army men. Many of these are young professional men, budding doctors, engineers, lawyers, seamen officers, dentists, and they ask for the newest technical books on their various subjects in order not to waste the time of their captivity. Such books are very expensive and none but the latest editions are of much use.³¹

Eventually, 149 Canadian officers (including 2nd Lieutenant Campbell) and 2,767 other ranks were freed from the camps following the Armistice of 11 November 1918. It would be impossible to know directly the effect of the benefit of the Camp Libraries and the War Book Scheme. Most histories of the First World War do not mention the role of libraries in German POW camps, but the fact that they even existed has to reveal a desire by the prisoners for more than food, clothing and shelter. It also shows the conviction of many British and Canadian volunteers and ordinary citizens that their imprisoned countrymen should be given the books and study materials to combat boredom and prepare for postwar life.

Notes

1. Jean Laflamme, *Les Camps de Détention au Québec durant la première guerre mondiale* (Montreal, 1973), p.37.
2. David J. Carter, *Behind Canadian Barbed Wire: Alien Refugee and Prisoner of War Camps in Canada, 1914-1915* (Calgary: Tumbleweed, 1980), p.23.
3. Desmond Morton, "Otter and Internment Operations," *Canadian Historical Review*, Volume LV, Number 1, May 1974, p.56.
4. Elaine Hoag, *Print on Board: Rare Examples of Shipboard Printing in the Arctic*. National Library News, Volume 29, Number 1, January 1997, pp. 1-2.
5. A.R. Skelley, *The Victorian Army at Home: The Recruitment and Terms and Conditions of the British Regular, 1859-1899* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1977), p.54. See also page 93 on the recognised value of libraries and their establishment at army barracks.

6. Jonathan F. Vance, *Objects of Concern: Canadian Prisoners of War Through the Twentieth Century* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1994), p.36.
7. National Archives of Canada (NAC) Record Group (RG) 25 A2, Volume 302 f. POW 90/15.
8. *Handbook to the Work, Constitution, and Rules of the Central Prisoners of War Committee* (London: Charles and Sons, 1917), p.53.
9. *The British Prisoner of War: The Monthly Journal of the Central Prisoners of War Committee of the British Red Cross and Order of St. John* (London, September 1917), p. 102.
10. Peter Anderson, *I That's Me: Escape from German Prison Camp and Other Adventures* (Edmonton: Bradburn, 1920), p.87.
11. Desmond Morton, *Silent Battle: Canadian Prisoners of War in Germany, 1914-1919* (Toronto: Lester, 1992), p.42.
12. Ella Scarlett-Synge, *Report of Visits to English Prisoners of War in Germany* (December 1915).
13. Morton, *Silent Battle*, pp.64-94. See also Desmond Morton, *When Your Number's Up: The Canadian Soldier in the First World War* (Toronto: Random House, 1993), Chapter 9.
14. *The British Prisoner of War*. September 1918, p.102.
15. Canadian War Museum Archives (CWMA), Archival Records, Accession 19800077, File 1.
16. *Ibid.*, Letter, 23 October 1918.
17. *Ibid.*, Letter, 5 October 1918.
18. *The British Prisoner of War*. July 1918, p. 77.
19. *The British Prisoner of War*. September 1918, p. 120.
20. Joseph Powell and Francis Gribble, *The History of Ruhlben: A Record of British Organization in a Prison Camp in Germany* (London), pp.190-193.
21. CWMA, Archival Records, Accession 19710056-112. This item is part of the fond of Lt-Col Arthur Philip Sprange.
22. CWMA, Archival Records, Accession 19710056-112. From poster distributed to prison camps.
23. Alfred T. Davles, *Student Captives: No.II, A further account of the Work of the British Prisoners of War Book Scheme (Educational)* (London, 1918), pp.20-23.
24. Mrs. Pope-Hennessy, *Map of the Main Prison Camps in Germany and Austria* (London: Nisbet, 191?), p.2.
25. *The Canadian's Who's Who: A Handbook of Canadian Biography of Living Characters: Volume II, 1936-1937* (Toronto: The Times, 1936), p.693.
26. Davles, p.26
27. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
28. CWMA, Archival Records, Accession 19710056-112. From a poster distributed to prison camps.
29. Davies, p.19.
30. *Ibid.*, p.26.
31. *The British Prisoner of War*. July 1918, p. 73.

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