Colin Taylor

Second Anglo-Afghan War

A British Soldier’s Letters to His Sweetheart
&
A Map of His Fort

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Dear Love,

   I apologize for the late reply to your last letter, I wish for nothing more than to mail you as soon as possible. I long to read your words from the page every day, and it breaks my heart to miss the opportunity when we are so far apart. I cannot express in full vigor the love that I felt and still feel for you. You were my world back in England, and persist to be my world when we are thousands of miles from each other. No soldier is a true hero unless he fights for not only his country, but for a woman worthy of his affection. I have always told you that I want to live a life without regrets, but I painstakingly tell you that I do have a single regret. My regret is that I did not cherish your presence as much as I should have when I was in your embrace. The way that you would caress me between your shoulders as I spoke with you about my university job and that life would be different for us is the exact moment I recall when I do not know if I will make it through my daily marches. To say that I miss you would not envelop the full scope of the heartbreak I feel when I know you are on the homeland with handsome men fighting for your hand in marriage. If I were there, I would be the best fighter of them all. Those pale blue eyes of yours have never seen such a warrior as the one I have become. War matures a man faster than the labors of a common man. I pray that you take that into consideration when you are tempted by these men to leave my side. You must remember that in times of hardship it is not always a hand you need to hold, but a rock to keep you steady.

   The fort is similar to the way I have described it to you before. Never have the tides on Porthcurno Beach changes so readily as the weather of the desert. During the
day, my body shrouds away from the sun as I begin to feel my skin melt. And then during the night, I long for the time when my muscles cease to quiver. The soldiers have a saying that goes, “God lays me down in a pool of ice, and wakes me when it’s water.” That is the only explanation we can gather for such a land as Afghanistan. Almighty God has created it as a testament to those whose faith has wandered; maybe Job’s trials were too much work to perform for every soul on Earth. Mentioning the sand only solidifies my agony in this wasteland. I fear the days we are besieged by sandstorms. When the skies are covered in brown, and the sun cannot find a way through the catastrophe, the only help is a shelter without a breach to the outside world. I have seen horses and men alike go blind or suffocate in search of a viable refuge.

There is no such thing as dirt here, only sand. It is a wonder that the Mohammeds are able to grow any crops at all. The only fruits I look forward to eating from the locals are the apricots and figs. Actually the figs are not for me; I give them to my mare, Aeris. It keeps her happy and healthy and makes visiting villages for reconnaissance run just a tad faster. You wouldn’t believe me when I say that Aeris is the most splendid sight for miles. If I were a better artist, I would show you the beauty of her mane as the sunsets behind her. Looking back to my time in England as a young man, I wish I had cherished the moments when I did not have a worry in the world. These days I always have to keep a revolver at my side and an infantryman at my back. Beth, you better believe that you are living the good life compared to the noble men and I who fight for our country.

Just yesterday we went into a village not far from our fort here in Kalat. You have to be on the lookout for anyone with a gun when you visit these towns, but the experience is not as futile as you may imagine. The villagers that have nothing to hide want to show
you that they truly have nothing to hide. They continue to pay us handsomely, far more than the wages we get from the C.O. and, in addition, they give us soda water. I have never had such great soda water! Contrasting with the hot day and high tensions, one sip of soda water makes my body breathe easy. Anything, even lukewarm water, helps to battle this 95-degree heat. One of my closer mates, Jack, lacks a sweetheart, like you, my Love, back home and has really taken a fancy to the Mohammed women. He still knows that it is unethical and against the rules to pursue the women here, but that does stop Jack from talking. Well, not really talking, more dancing and laughing because neither Jack nor the women usually have a clue what the other is saying. Sometimes it make me sad to see men with their adorn ones, while I know you are thousands of miles away. Luckily, I know our love is strong and distance is not a concern of ours. Just remember that I will remain faithful to you and never wander into the embrace of another woman for as long as I shall live.

I almost forgot, but we did confiscate some spirits from soldiers in the eastern block of the fort. They deserved it though because their platoon was always strolling through the villages too chipper to go unnoticed. It turned out that they packed their rucksacks full of liquor and homemade spirits. It is a wonder that no one caught them sooner, if only they had been a little more incognito. A soldier from the adjacent platoon visiting from HQ turned them in when he asked for a search of their premises from the C.O. of the fort. They were younger men merely trying to pass the time of war faster because they knew they were missing out on the splendors of being bachelors in England. I pitied them, but not enough to not enjoy the seized goods. Four other lieutenants and I were three sheets to the wind by the time of sunset. The stories that were told are too
unbearable for the ink of this page, but let me just hint that one of the men was not always as straightforward as his pastor father might have expected. We jumped over the fire more times than was necessary, and at one point Alfie dropped the tobacco pipe his father gave him into the fire! It burned up most of his shag, but a half-crisped pipe didn’t stop us from enjoying ourselves! Stories were told until dawn, but not once do I recall mentioning your name to them. You are one of my attachments to home that I feel if I were to speak of you, you would materialize. You are my unspoken treasure, my silent angel.

Even though that night went well, Samuel and James were discovered in the morning for their drunkenness. They each received twenty-five lashes for their crime, but even in their anguish, they never betrayed a word about the other two men or I. However, knowing our C.O.’s mentality, I would have guessed that if our names were confessed, their beating would have been more severe. That is because the loyalty of our platoon does not rest in the command; it rests in the heart of its cavalry.

I have mailed a few of my other friends from Belfast, but either my mail has not reached them or their mail has not reached me. I thought surely Harvey, my classmate from the University of London, would have sent something because we were regular correspondents back home. It is possible to make a conjecture that they are unsupportive of the war and wish to make my time spent here as lonely as possible. Whatever the case is, I am glad that I still have a formal exchange of letters with you, whom I love and adore. I apologize if I sound resentful for only receiving your letters because I am still very thankful for them. I only wish I had more support from my colleagues for defending England’s integrity against Afghani leaders.
Anyways, it has been a few weeks now since I sent my last letter, so I might as well give you a chance to reply to all that is happening with me. I enjoy reading your words in every letter that you send. Your voice and positivity are just two of the many attributes you convey to me through your letters than keep me living through this war. Sometimes I wonder if it will ever end, or if I will die in this desert along men who had so much potential to change the world. It is a pity that so many men have died already in a land we do not call our own and for a cause of politics that most of these men do not understand. I find that it is hard to take a positive outlook on life in the fort when I hardly know what to expect tomorrow. However, I can make you one promise, Beth. I will come back to Britain, one way or another, and I will love you with all of my heart.

Yours truly,

William Ackerman
Notes on Letter 1

Page 1: This is the beginning of Letter 1. I start the letter off with William’s love for Beth because with every letter Gisborough wrote, he expressed his love for Margaret. The December 1879 letter references how Gisborough fears Maggie will lose his love for him with all the other men vying for her love. Gisborough wants to come back and fight these men, same as in the case of William.

Page 2: I reference the November 1879 letter about sandstorms and Gisborough’s thankfulness for his horse. Gisborough refers to Afghani soldiers as Mohammeds. Throughout the first letter, Gisborough complains about the climate and drastic change from hot days to cold nights. Refers to horses as mares (female). Village reconnaissance is a frequent thing of Gisborough to check for local uprising. Villagers would always pay the soldier handsomely to keep them quiet and happy. C.O. means Commanding Officer. I am trying to incorporate slang used by Gisborough.

Page 3: I improvised a man who has no lover back home to show Williams longing for Beth. The 95-degree weather is what Gisborough reported in one of his earlier 1879 letters. Spirits were throughout the readings and a rare delicacy that soldiers cherished and would burn though quickly (December – January 1880 letter).

Page 4: Gisborough mentioned many times how loyalty amongst the soldier is important to have because the conditions of war are terrible. Gisborough writes in the December – January 1879 letter about how he only gets letter from Maggie and not his other “friends”. At that point, he begins to complain frequently about his circumstances and only writes about his love for Maggie.

Page 5: Towards the last letters of Gisborough in 1880, he begins to take a grim outlook on life because he believes Maggie no longer loves him because she is not sending him letters as frequently. On this page, I am trying to convey that William is worried about the war and struggles to remain positive. This is the end of Letter 1.
Letter 2

Dear Sweetheart,

There is so much to tell you since the last letter that I sent you! Let me just start with saying that I was able to get a little taste of England from a newspaper reporter. I initially had high hopes that he wrote for one of the bigger newspapers in England, such as the Daily Telegraph or the Observer, but he writes for a smaller paper based out of India called the Herald. He told me that he was planning to write an article on a lieutenant named Richard Womensky, but Lt. Womensky was too arrogant to be written in such a “subordinate” paper. I thought this very rude of him, but considering I fit the specifications and was a viable replacement to Lt. Womensky, I was not complaining. Mr. Barkley, the reporter, asked me about all the facets of life in a British fort, and I was more than delighted to indulge him! I told him all about the battles I had fought and the toll it takes on infantrymen to talk to your colleague one minute and carry him off the battlefield the next. At one point, I brought both of us to tears when I recalled the accounts of losing Baldwin. Baldwin and I had gone through training together and separated when we assigned to different platoons, but we managed to cross paths now and then when we were put on marches. It broke my heart when I got the news he had been killed after their fort was ambushed from Afghans hiding in a nearby hamlet. I was prepared to deal with the death of my friends; however I was just not prepared for how they found him. Floating down the Kabul River with the 47 other men from his unit. Another platoon had been put in charge of returning the bodies of Baldwin and the others to England, but neglected to do so. The moment they decided to take the easy way out and throw the bodies down a river was the exact moment that fighting began within the
British military. The platoon that neglected to give a proper burial to its brothers never had the respect of the military after that. That story made for a great article, and now you may tell your friends that your future husband is in newspapers across the world!

Four days ago I had another recurring dream about you. The dream always starts with you and I swimming in the lake behind Mr. Tucker’s farm when we were kids. It is a perfect recollection of the day when I first told you I had stronger feelings for you than those I had for my friends. Then you would blush and tell me that you felt the same way. The dream then briefly displays our biggest moments. The moment I first kissed you, the moment I first told you “I love you”, and then the moment I proposed and you said nothing. I wake up every time I propose to you because it is the only time I have ever felt so lost in my life. You never said no, and you never said yes. I kept on living with you like nothing had happened, but I knew that something was different. I cannot place my finger on what you were thinking, but when I get back, I just want an answer. If it is no, then I will do my best to live with myself. And if it is yes, I will make you the happiest woman in the world. You have my permission to quote me on that through this letter.

However I wish to no longer speak on the past, so here is my present. The days are still on fire and the nights are still on ice. The days are improving though because the last village we visited was kind enough to give us three of their young men who spoke both Dari and English. This was done in exchange for them being able to study in London. Our C.O. agreed to their terms, and since then, translating for other villages has been much quicker. Instead of taking all-day to sweep a village of 300 people, it takes, on average, about 5 hours with the translators. It may not sound like much of an improvement, but every little thing helps when getting through life here.
Beth, think about the largest living animal you have ever seen. Have you got it? I am guessing that you are probably thinking about one of the draft horses that Mr. Tucker had on his farm. I used to agree with you on that, until I saw an elephant. Thirty-seven of them walked along our fort. They are gargantuan creatures that can block out the sun and shade twenty people. I spoke with the man in charge of the convoy, and he told me that Indians have used elephants in war for centuries. I may not know much about my .45 caliber revolver, but I bet my life it would not stop an elephant dead in its tracks. The nose of an elephant alone is capable of throwing a full-grown man thirty feet to his death, yet these docile animals let strangers ride upon their backs. I asked how they tamed such beasts, and the tamer told me that when the elephants are young they chain their legs together. The young elephants struggle and struggle to get loose, but ultimately give up. And so when they grow up, the tamer needs only to put rope around their ankles to stop them from running away. It is quite sad that an elephant in all its glory is tricked so easily, but that goes to show the power of man over the animal kingdom.

The sandstorms have begun hitting us once again. This time we have been ready for them. We have aligned our tent openings northeast to southwest because the strongest winds tend to come from the northwest. This has proven to greatly combat sand coming into our tents. Four of the new recruits were actually tasked with solving the dilemma of sandstorms after an officer died from a lung illness brought about by the sandstorms. I knew how bad of a problem the sand had become because I was the one to bury him. You could see through the almost translucent skin on his chest to his sand-stained lungs. It is a cruel way to die by suffocating for days. I did not know the man, and that is why I was given the honor of burying him. I imagine he has a family like the rest of us who will
miss him, and a life he never got the chance to live. It’s a bloody shame to die in a war, but not in a battle.

I have been thinking about you a lot lately, and I doubt that you reciprocate the same feelings. I think that because I have not received a letter from you in months now. I am afraid that this will become a characteristic of our relationship where I will begin sending two letters for every one of yours. Please tell me that this is not true, and your love for me is as strong as the day when I marched off to war. You are my life now; you are everything, my darling. Maybe it was wrong of me to not ask for your hand in marriage before I left, but I only did so because if something were to happen to me, I did not want to leave you to be a widow. I think back now and wish I had been more selfish in courting you. The guilt from knowing that you are bound to me in holy matrimony might have kept you from being tempted to wander into another man’s embrace. How could I have been so ignorant? I am getting myself all worked up, and now I fear the ink on this page will begin to smear because of my tears. I wish you knew how much you mean to me, Beth. Since the moment I laid my eyes upon you, I knew that you were the one. There has never been a doubt in my mind. You have always known me on a level that no one else has. We grew up together, got into trouble together, and made it through life together. I hope that means something to you because it means something to me. I mean this from the bottom of my heart when I tell you that no one will ever love you as much as I do, my angel.

I do not wish to end the letter on that sorrowful note, but rather a chipper one. I received news a couple days ago that our forces are defeating the Afghan’s. This is not only great for our country, but it is great for me. It means that I may be coming home

sooner that I initially thought when I volunteered for this bloody war. I can only imagine what a warm bath would do to this grime my body has accumulated. Maybe you could start heating the water, and I will be back in Belfast soon enough to enjoy its warmth. I wish you the best of luck with your job at the brewery, and I pray the spark in your heart for me never dies.

With love and affection,

William Ackerman
Notes on Letter 2

Page 6: This is the beginning on Letter 2. Gisborough talks about visiting a newspaper reporter in his November 1879 letter. Gisborough, however in contrast to William, is very angry because he thought the reporter was from a famous newspaper. I try to tie the Gisborough and William together saying that one lieutenant (Gisborough) turned down the interview.

Page 7: Gisborough dreams a lot about Maggie in numerous letters. He always has a good dream about her and then wakes up depressed that she is not with him. An example of an account can be seen in the December – January 1879 letter. I also reference photos from the First Anglo-Afghan War from the Rubenstein where Afghani men are alongside the British soldier and assist in every day life. These Afghani men were not always treated well and usually had separate tents and areas. This aspect of life can be seen on my map.

Page 8: In the November 1879 letter, Gisborough talks about how he saw elephants for the first time and how he was in awe of them. The sandstorm reference is being brought up again to reflect the illnesses and deaths it caused in camps.

Page 9: Towards the ends of Gisborough’s letters, he got very antsy about Maggie’s love for him, and approximately the last four letters before he came home were solely about his love. I thought I would put this in the form of William’s and Beth’s relationship.

Page 10: I wrapped up the letter with some positivity. This is the end of Letter 2.
References:


