

## Letters from Huck James to his Parents

1902-1915

Transcribed and annotated by John Barnard  
December 2019

*These letters cover Huck's childhood, adolescence, undergraduate career at Oxford, and the first few months of World War I. They show his growing maturity, and increased physical confidence following his childhood illness (possibly a form of tuberculosis) and "delicacy": in September 1912 he is concerned about the potential dampness of ground-floor rooms in his Oxford college, whereas by January 1915 he seems to take the privations of winter life in an army training camp within his stride.*

*There are numerous references to family members, and I have added footnotes clarifying these, and giving some background information where appropriate – some of this is taken from the memoirs of Harold's sister (Mary Hindle Mackinnon, *For all that Time has Held*. Privately published, NSW, Australia, 1993. ISBN 0 646 14825 7). I have also added some other explanatory footnotes.*

### Letters Transcribed

- 13 Jul [1902] Tunbridge Wells  
New governess; Mollie's appeal for father to come home; wish to go to India; visit from Grannie Hindle.
- 13 Sep [1906] Almora, India  
Bob (Eric)'s nursery rhyme; preparation for exams; enquiry about pigeons and father's plans to join family at Almora.
- 3 Sep [1907] Tunbridge Wells  
End of holidays; visits to London and circus; collision of cart and carriage.
- 16 Nov 1909 Sydenham  
Approaching 16, trying for Oxford Locals examination; wish to go to Dulwich College, though concerned about participation in school games.
- 6 Sep 1912 Walmer  
Accommodation arrangements at Oxford; servant problems at family home; poisoning of Harold and his mother by arsenic in his tonic; uncle Leo's imminent wedding.

- 6 Dec 1912 Oxford  
Father's possible new job; plans for family Christmas; grade on logic paper; vacation study needed.
- 17 Sep 1913 Plymouth  
Plans to return to London via steamer after visit to cousins in Plymouth; concern about mother's health in India, Edie James's meeting with Sir Alfred Croft, and letter in the *Morning Post*, concerning her campaign on behalf of Harold's father.
- 23 Jan 1914 Oxford  
Problems with academic work; consideration of career possibilities in Diplomatic or Consular service; mother's neuralgia; beagling for exercise; thanks for allowance.
- 6 Feb 1914 Oxford  
News of parents' return to England; academic work on English literature; beagling and award of hare mask; letter to Aunt Edie.
- 12 Aug 1914 Tunbridge Wells  
Outbreak of War against Germany; travel to stay with Aunt Edie at Tunbridge Wells; commandeering of private horses and houses; plans to visit mother's brother at Chilworth; enquiries about commission in army.
- 31 Dec 1914 Walmer  
Christmas and New Year with family on leave from army camp; bomb dropped on Dover; anticipated departure for the front.
- 13 Jan 1915 Witley Camp  
Life in army camp; following cross country run on horseback; insect infestation of men; surly and irritable captain of company; enjoyed home visit; farewells on station platform; anticipated departure for front; new hutments for officers; prospects for "aeroplaning".
- 28 Jan 1915 Witley Camp  
Inspection of troops in snowstorm; threat of air-raid; air-raid precautions at family house in Walmer; brief visit to see family at Tunbridge Wells; lobbying in respect of possible new position in India; fire in hutments.

**13 Jul 1902 (age 8)**

Walmer Cottage  
Mount Sion<sup>1</sup>  
July 13 [1902<sup>2</sup>]

My dear Dad

Thank you for your letters. I like my Governess very much. She makes my lessons very interesting. Perhaps I am going to London with Auntie<sup>3</sup> some day soon. Miss Smyth has gone and I am very sorry but the little nurse which is here now is rather nice. Miss Smyth started at 7.30 P.M. and the train was so late that she got home at 11.30 P.M. Why the train was so late was because there had been an accident.

July 19<sup>th</sup>

Mollie sends her love and she says she wants you to come back 'caus' Mum wants a Daddy. I should like to go to India very much and I should like you to say that we can go. Grannie Hindle<sup>4</sup> and Lillie<sup>5</sup> are coming to stay in an apartment a little way higher up Mount Sion. They are coming on Thursday and are going to stay two weeks.

With all best love and kisses, your ever loving son  
Harold

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1 Walmer Cottage, Mount Sion, Tunbridge Wells TN1, is now a grade II listed building.

2 Dated on the basis of Harold's sister Mollie's development (Mary Hindle James, known as Mollie, and later Mrs Donald Mackinnon, was born in November 1899), and the death of their grandmother in Dec 1902. Harold would have been 8.

3 Probably father's unmarried elder sister Edith ("Edie") Emily Coulson James (1860-1936), who also lived at Tunbridge Wells. She was an art historian, a suffragist and a member of the committee of the intellectual women's Lyceum Club; Mollie's memoirs (p. 17) describe her as "somewhat eccentric and very much ahead of her times". In his teenage years Harold seems to have had a rather "difficult" relationship with her, though the way in which he refers to this in his letters to his father suggest that the problem may have lain as much on her side as his (see the references to her in letters HHJ-21-6, HHJ-21-9 and HHJ-21-10).

4 Edith Hindle, wife of Harold's maternal grandfather Joseph Hindle (1838-1892). A Monumental Inscription shown at <https://www.kentarchaeology.org.uk/research/monumental-inscriptions/higham> reads "Joseph Hindle, died 18 Aug 1892 aged 54 and also Edith, wife of Joseph Hindle, died 13 Dec 1902."

5 Lilian Hindle, the unmarried younger sister of Harold's mother, also known as "Lull", who cared for Grannie Hindle until her death, and then assisted Harold's mother with her children, in both England and India, for some periods taking sole charge of them when Harold's parents were both living in India. After the War she married and moved to Australia.

**13 Sep 1906 (age 12)**

Sep 13<sup>th</sup> [1906<sup>6</sup>]

My dear Dad

Thank you very much for that lovely box of creams. It was such a nice surprise to have on Saturday. I am sending you a piece of poetry Mum thought you would like.

I forgot to tell you in my last letter that Bob does "pat-a-cake, pat-a-cake," and when he comes to "Prick it, and prick it," he actually says "Prickum, Prickum. Isn't he getting on? Have you been to the Zoo yet?

I am getting ready for my exams which are next week.

I have had several red line weeks lately you will be glad to hear. How were Poll and the pigeons when you left them? Have I any more yet?

How nice and soon are you coming up here?

Now I am afraid I must end up as I must do my lessons.

With much love

Your ever-loving son

Harold

Almora

1. Oh look at her Hills  
    So lovely and green.  
I am sure such Hills  
    Have never been seen.
  
2. Oh look at her rivers  
    So beautifully blue.  
They are lovely  
    Don't you think so too?

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6 Dated on basis of younger brother Bob's development (Eric Trevenen James, known as "Bob", was born in India in August 1904) and the whole family's return to the UK in autumn 1906. Probably written at Almora, a town in the Kuamon hills of northern India, with views of the Himalaya, where mother and children went to escape the summer heat on the Indian plains.

3.     And there in the distance  
          The snows look at you.  
Are they not perfect?  
          I am sure that is true.
  
4.     And then all the flowers  
          Are of the best hue.  
And almost each day  
          You find some kind new.
  
5.     My heart's in these Hills  
          So lofty and high  
And here will I live  
          And thrive till I die.
  
6.     Then under a tree on the  
          Top of the Hill  
They will leave me alone  
          In the peace and the still.
  
7.     And there will I lie with  
          The blue sky above me  
And the birds and the  
          Flowers alone will still love me.

### 3 Sep 1907 (age 13)

Walmer Cottage  
Sep 3<sup>rd</sup> [1907<sup>7</sup>]

My dear Dad

My holidays are nearly up I am sorry to say. The day before yesterday I went to London and I went to see the Tower of London, the British Museum, the Guild Hall, the Mansion House and the London Stone. Auntie Edith took me to all those places, was not she kind, and yesterday Mum paid for Auntie Lill and me to go to see Lord George Sanger's Circus. Mum has just told me that I could have one more holiday week. Mum told me just after I had said my holidays were nearly up. I am very glad we are going to India to see you and the dear old place again. Mollie says when she gets to India she is going to ride her pony and say "hallo kind old dad".<sup>8</sup>

Sep 5<sup>th</sup>

What do you think I saw the day before yesterday? A collision with a carriage and a cart. They both went over. There was two men, two women and a little baby in them. An old woman was hurt very much and the baby was not expected to live. I do not know whether others were hurt or not but I expect some of the horses did not fall down only the carriage and the silly thing would not keep still and kept going round and round with the carriage and all the poor people under it. I am afraid I must stop now to post the letter.

With love and your every loving son  
Harold

Mollie sends her love

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7 Dated as 1907. The whole family had returned to England in 1906, but after father's 6 months' leave he went back to India. The rest of the family then spent several months at the School House in Monmouth (where father's youngest brother Lionel (Leo) James was headmaster), and then stayed briefly in Tunbridge Wells before mother went to join her husband in India. The children were then looked after by their aunt Lull. This letter was evidently written between the two parents' voyages to India.

8 In fact only mother went to India, presumably to ensure that the children (Harold was now 13 and Mollie nearly 9) could be educated in England. Harold had been seriously ill, possibly with tuberculosis, leaving him severely asthmatic, and at this stage he had private tutors rather than going to school.

**16 Nov 1909 (age 15)**

Birchwood  
Sydenham Hill<sup>9</sup>  
S.E.

Tuesday Nov 16<sup>th</sup> 09

My dear Father

Mrs Peck has been talking to me about examinations this afternoon, & she suggested that I might work up for the Senior Oxford Locals this year. I am too old now to try for the Junior exam, as I shall be 16<sup>10</sup> before it takes place this year, but I might try for the Senior after next summer. I think I should like to, & it will be something to work for. Have you really decided that I may not go to school, that it is best to work at home? I wonder if it would be all right for me to go to Dulwich. I somehow think it would, especially if I had Miss Sack for an hour in the evenings to help me over any difficulties in the preparation, which is the work I find most hard.

But if you have quite decided otherwise, I must give up the idea once for all. Of course there is always the bother about games, which I suppose I shall not be able to play, but that can't be helped, & I should like to try school again I think. Will you tell me what you think about all this please. It is time for me to change for dinner, so I must stop for tonight.

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9 This was the home of Harold's great-uncle Richard Pennington (c. 1834-1910). Harold and his sister and brother, lived there, cared for by their Aunt Lull, who acted as Pennington's housekeeper. He died in 2010 and the house was sold, after which Lull and the children moved to 18 Jasper Road in nearby Norwood. Harold became a day-boy at Dulwich College.

10 This confirms Harold's birth as being no later than November 1894, which is consistent with his birth registration (Apr-Jun 1894, Barton Regis, 6a, 48). It is inconsistent with the birth date of 1 Mar 1895 shown in his 1967 passport [HHJ-15] and on his gravestone [HHJ-12].

## 6 Sep 1912 (age 18)

Cameron House  
Walmer<sup>11</sup>

September 6<sup>th</sup> 1912

My Dear Father

You will be glad to hear that all has been definitely settled about my rooms in Oxford.<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately I could not get an attic in Peckwater, but we have heard from the Censor today that he has assigned me rooms in Meadow Buildings – not on the ground floor – as he had heard that I would prefer this to a garret in Peck. I should not think that the damp ought to affect me at all,<sup>13</sup> since my rooms are not on the ground floor.

Thank you so much for the information about my furniture, etc. It certainly sounds a rather complicated affair buying one's own furniture new, & I think it will be much the wisest plan for me to take what there is second-hand. I am afraid I shall not get a chance of seeing it first through.

Yes, it is rather hard that the weather should have been so unattractive all through my holiday. We have given up hoping for anything better, & are fairly resigned. Indeed we view the sun with mild surprise now, whenever it deigns to reveal itself, instead of feeling surprised at its absence!

There is again some agitation starting once more on the subject of servants – or rather a servant. The temporary (or "temperate" as Moll calls it!) girl will have to leave soon, & there seems an unpleasant possibility of our being left servantless again – except for little Mary.

The temporary girl, though she can do no cooking at all, has been a great help to Lull, for she is most willing and pleasant, & is quite presentable for opening the front door etc. Aunt will be very sorry when she has to leave. It is a great pity Hilda was taken ill, for though she was by no means a perfect servant, everything was going quite smoothly, & she was very superior in appearance.

We have been through a rather unpleasant experience since I last wrote! I started my tonic again on Sunday, & soon after the second dose I began to feel queer. By seven o'clock in the evening I felt still more queer, & went to bed & became so queer by 10, that the doctor was summoned. He stayed with me till after eleven, & did all he could, but I hope I shall not have to go through

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11 After Harold's parents' return to England on leave, the family purchased and moved to Cameron House, Walmer Castle Road, Walmer, Deal, Kent. Harold's father soon went back to his job in India, but until she went to join him in 1913 his mother continued to live at Walmer with the children and her sister, Aunt Lull.

12 Harold is about to go up to Christ Church, Oxford. His father was an alumnus of the college, so would have been familiar with the student accommodation there. Peckwater Quadrangle and the Meadow Building are parts of the college, and its administrative officials are called Censors.

13 Presumably Harold was still being affected by his health problems.



another hour like that in a hurry! It was most disagreeable. Before he left, my sickness was not quite so violent, but about 11.40, Mother who was sitting up with me, began to develop the same symptoms! You may imagine the consternation! It appears that on my being taken ill, she took one dose of the tonic to prove – as she thought – that it was not that which had upset me! It was a rash thing to do, & she paid a heavy penalty poor little thing! I felt so sorry for her, for she was so upset at having caused poor Lull the extra anxiety.

Auntie sat up with us all night, & even ran for the doctor in scanty and hastily donned garments at two in the morning, because she thought we were getting worse! I don't think any of us slept a wink all night!

I was kept in bed two days and mother three, but we have both practically recovered now, except that one of my eyes is still rather inflamed, & mother feels a bit weak. The doctor paid us a farewell visit. He is a very nice man, & was most sympathetic. The cause of our being poisoned seems to have been that the chemist put the wrong amount of arsenic in my tonic – a very careless thing to do. It was an adventure! Lull was very good about it all, although she was a little annoyed at Mother for being so risky – poor Mother! I don't know how Aunt managed to do cooking, housework, & the management of invalids the next day, after such a sleepless night! It was her birthday too! We are going to celebrate this day next week though, after mother has been to London to buy presents. She had arranged to go to town yesterday, and would have been returning this evening, but of course she was not strong enough to go. It is a great pity, for it would have been such a relief to her to get some of her Indian shopping done. She is going up on Monday next, however. We got to the circus last Friday, after all, & it was quite good.

It is uncle Leo's wedding day on Monday! I wonder how he and Miss Clabburn are feeling!<sup>14</sup> They will not get much of a honeymoon I am afraid, as the term at Monmouth will begin so soon!

Your loving son

H Hindle James

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14 Lionel James and Ethel de Pearsall Clabburn (who had been the matron at Monmouth school when Harold and his family stayed there in 1907) were married at Brighton on 9 Sep 1912. It was a small-scale wedding and the only James family guests were Lionel's sister Edith and his cousin Dr Thomas Noy Leah, who was Best Man.

## 6 Dec 1912 (age 18)

Christ Church  
Oxford [Letterhead]

Dec 6<sup>th</sup> 1912

My Dear Dad

Just a line to wish you the best of wishes for Xmas & the New Year! I wonder if one of your Xmas presents will be the Directorship! Which do you actually prefer from a personal point of view, being Principal or Director? I should rather imagine that being Director has its disadvantages, but as regards hard work, & responsibility, I should not think anything could be much more severe than the management of the College!<sup>15</sup>

This is really the last day of Term at last! It will seem quite funny to be home again! Aunt Edie has arrived in Walmer now I think. We shall be quite a family party on Xmas day. Aunt Edie has improved very much lately, & I dare say she will be very nice.

I have had my logic paper returned to me, & did a good bit better than I expected, & Mr Warner<sup>16</sup> seemed quite satisfied. I got S-. Williamson<sup>17</sup> I think had VS – two stages lower than mine. It seems that the marking descends from S as follows S-, S=, S≡, VS, NS.

I shall have plenty of work to keep up in the vac[ation] it seems! All the subjects I think should be looked over as far as possible before next term. I must close now & go to my bank. We shall all be thinking of you on Xmas day.

Your loving son

Harold

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15 Harold's father had been Principal of Presidency College in Calcutta since 1907, and was the obvious candidate for the Directorship of the Indian Educational Service. His failure to be appointed led to something of a campaign on his behalf organised by his sister Edie, and even to questions in Parliament.

16 Possibly S. A. Warner, author of *Oxford Cathedral* (1924)

17 Possibly Hugh Henshall Clifford Williamson (28 Nov 1894 - 16 Sep 1916), who also went up to Christ Church in 1912, and was killed in the battle of the Somme (<https://www.chch.ox.ac.uk/fallen-alumni/lieutenant-hugh-henshall-clifford-williamson>). Mollie Mackinnon's memoirs (p. 10) also mention a boy called Williamson, who shared a tutor with Harold when they were both studying for Oxford entrance.

## 17 Sep 1913 (age 19)

R. M. Barracks

Plymouth

Wednesday Sept 17<sup>th</sup> 1913

My dear Father,

I am having to get my letter off early this week, as I am going to have a little voyage during the next two days, & shall possibly reach London too late on Friday to post for the Indian mail. I leave the docks here at 6 o'clock this afternoon. My steamer is the "Lady Wolsley", – quite a nice little boat. She runs between Dublin and London, and calls here on the way. I think I shall enjoy the little sea trip, and incidentally the fare is rather less than the railway fare, – though of course the food will make it come to rather more, but it is less ordinary than going by train. I think it is going to be a delightfully sunny day for my start anyhow. There is not a cloud in the sky, though it rained a lot yesterday. The pleasant party is quite breaking up now. Aunt Edie left here early yesterday, Peggy<sup>18</sup> returns to school today after lunch, I am off at 6 p.m., & cousin Cassie<sup>19</sup> is also leaving Plymouth quite soon!

I have enjoyed my stay here very much, my new relations have been very nice to me. Uncle Bill<sup>20</sup> and Aunt Nell<sup>21</sup> say they feel they have known me for a long time because I am so like you! Aunt Nell is very jolly isn't she. She has talked a lot about you whenever I have been to see her, or gone for a walk with her. I think she is very fond of you. Uncle Bill is also very nice. Aunt Cassie is a dear plump old lady isn't she! She is always smiling. We had a jolly dinner party there at Aunt Cassie's on Friday. I am going to spend one night in town with cousin Herbert<sup>22</sup> on Friday next before going to Walmer. I shall pass Walmer in the steamer. I expect the Castle Road houses can be seen from the sea, so I shall get a new view of Cameron House!

It will be very nice to get home, in spite of the jolly holiday I have been having away. I am so distressed to hear that little Mother is feeling the heat so much. She does not seem to have been feeling well for some time. I wish she were stronger. It makes things so much harder for her, feeling like that. It sounds a very pleasant plan of yours to go up to that little hotel near Ram Ghur<sup>23</sup>. A hotel within fruit gardens sounds delightfully cool & restful. I have often heard this hotel spoken of before. I think you used to speak of it in the old days when we stopped at Ram Ghur on our way to Almona. I hope you will go there all right & find it as nice as it sounds.

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18 Margaret Balliol Scott (1897-1996), later Mrs W.C. Beagley, was a second cousin to Harold.

19 Katharine Louisa Mullins (née Leah) (1872-1962) was Harold's father's first cousin, and Peggy Scott's aunt.

20 William Carkeet James (1830-1914), was Harold's father's uncle.

21 As well as being Harold's father's aunt by marriage, Ellen James, née Leah (1852-1928), was also a distant cousin by virtue of shared descent from Thomas Coulson of Penzance (1736-1782).

22 I assume this is George James Herbert Mullins (1868-1943), Cassie Mullins's husband. He had a career in the Royal Marines (from which he retired in 1928 with the rank of General), and was presumably stationed in London at this point.

23 Now known as Ramgarh in the eastern Indian state of Jharkhand.

I have now a special piece of news to tell you. Sir Alfred Croft<sup>24</sup> came to lunch at Durnford Street<sup>25</sup> to talk things over with Aunt Edie, & I went in after lunch to meet him. He seems a very pleasant gentleman, very neat and dapper in appearance. He looks quite comparatively young, but to our great surprise we found out from "Who's Who" afterwards that he must be 72. It was most interesting to meet him, after hearing so much about him. He talked things over very keenly with Aunt Edie, and took away various papers etc. to read over afterwards. There was a somewhat unsatisfactory paragraph in the Morning Post the other day, supposed to be founded on news from India. However Aunt Edie promptly wrote them a very good letter pointing out its weak points, & got cousin Noy<sup>26</sup> to sign the letter as she thought it undesirable for it to be signed by a James. The letter was published<sup>27</sup> in full in the Morning Post two days later, so that was quite satisfactory.

Now I must close. Will just send a card from London if I arrive in time.

Your loving son

H. Hindle James

Best love to Mother. I do hope she is feeling better.

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24 Sir Alfred Woodley Croft (1841-1925) was Director of Public Instruction in Bengal 1877-1897, and thus a senior educational administrator in British India in the generation before Henry Roshier James. He was presumably being asked to assist in Edie James's efforts on behalf of Henry.

25 The street in Plymouth where Harold's great-uncle and aunt lived.

26 Dr Thomas Noy Leah (1876-1937), Henry Roshier James's first cousin, and the younger brother of Cassie Mullins.

27 I have not yet tried to find this letter, or the earlier article to which it refers.

**23 Jan 1914 (aged 19)**

Ch[rist]. Ch[urch].

Oxford

Jan 23<sup>rd</sup> 1914

My dear Father

Very many thanks for your long and encouraging letter last mail. It was very good of you to write to me so fully with so much helpful advice, and it was very cheering.

I shall certainly follow your hints and suggestions as much as possible.

Well, the main point is satisfactorily settled I am glad to say. I had my interview with Bell,<sup>28</sup> & he was quite pleasant, & was quite willing after all to let me continue with the Literature to give me a fairer trial. I most sincerely hope it will go all right now. I shall do my best to bring this about, and make the most of the opportunity. It is a great relief that I am able to continue. I don't believe I made sufficient mention of the telegram you sent. I was very glad to have it & to know in the main what your opinion was about my giving up the Literature. I was feeling very puzzled as to what I ought to do.

There appears to have been a slight mistake in connection with my last Term's work which may have made Bell's decision additionally unfavourable. Sisam,<sup>29</sup> to whom I went last term for all my lectures in the language branch of work, set a kind of general paper in the last week. I myself however had not done all the subjects he set. Bell advised me to omit Havelok,<sup>30</sup> & I did so. I thought Sisam realized I had not been to the Havelok lectures, so simply omitted the pieces from that book. However, he misunderstood this, & sent in an unfavourable report in consequence. I found this out when I went for the usual interview with Sisam at the beginning of term. He said the rest of my paper was quite all right.

You remember I mentioned something about the Diplomatic Service lately. I was given Mr Kelmshead's<sup>31</sup> name by Uncle Leo<sup>32</sup> as a likely person to give advice, & he also spoke to him about me lately when he met him. I received a letter from Mr K. & went to interview him in his rooms in the High<sup>33</sup> yesterday. The Diplomatic Service is "no go" I am afraid. In addition to a stiffish exam one has to have £400 a year at least of one's own. The consular service however seems more

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28 I have not so far been able to identify Bell, but presumably he was Harold's tutor at Christ Church.

29 Kenneth Sisam (1887-1971) was a New Zealander who won a Rhodes Scholarship to Merton College Oxford in 1910, but began lecturing in early and middle English while still a student, and later worked on the Oxford English Dictionary.

30 *Havelok the Dane* is a middle-English romance dating from the 13<sup>th</sup> Century.

31 I have not so far been able to identify Kelmshead.

32 Lionel James (1868-1948), Henry Roshier James's youngest brother, and also an alumnus of Christ Church; headmaster of Monmouth Grammar School 1906-1927.

33 The High Street in the centre of Oxford, home to many University buildings and colleges

practicable. For this however he says Literature would be useless, & I should have to turn to a History or Law school. Also I should have to make a very special study of French & either German & Italian, or Italian & Spanish. I should have to spend most of my vacations abroad in these respective countries. It would I dare say be interesting. I wonder if it is worth thinking of. Mr K. suggests my writing to the Foreign Office for full particulars. I suppose this had better be done. I shall get my uncle's advice.

I am most awfully sorry to hear that my poor little Mother has been laid up with neuralgia. It is such a painful thing, and so weakening. I remember how she suffered with it once in Bankipore.<sup>34</sup> It is very grieving to think of her with it again. I do hope I shall hear she is better next mail, though I am afraid it still may not have quite gone. It is apt to drag on rather I am afraid, on and off, for a bit.

I am quite settled down here again & have plenty of work. Several men I know have vanished temporarily at least owing to Mods!

I cannot decide what to do about exercise. It is so annoying that the ordinary things are no good to me. I enjoy Beagling,<sup>35</sup> but of course strenuous running is not quite in my line. I intend however to continue with the Beagling at present I think. I wish I could manage riding once or twice a week. I don't know what it would come to but I expect it would be too much.

Many thanks for my term's allowance. It came just at the right time. I only had a very little left! Also many thanks for the £5 sent to the book shop. It will be very helpful as I have so many books to get. I am so glad Bell did not make difficulties! He was quite pleased with this week's essay, & appeared to consider it a quite satisfactory piece of work. But he never did show any particular dissatisfaction with my essays. That is what is curious.

Best love to my Mother. I do hope she is feeling better.

Always your affec<sup>ate</sup> son

Harold

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34 A neighbourhood of the Indian city of Patna, where the James family lived 1903-6. It is the model for the fictional city of Chandrapore in E.M. Forster's novel *A Passage to India*.

35 Beagling is traditionally the hunting of rabbits and hares using beagle hounds, with the pack being followed on foot. Harold presumably followed the college's own pack, the Christ Church and Farley Hill Beagles. Though the pack still exists it no longer has any formal connection with the college.

## 6 Feb 1914 (age 19)

Ch[rist]. Ch[urch].

Oxford

Feb 6<sup>th</sup> 1914

My dear Father

Last mail's news was the most excellent any mail has brought us since your departure from England! It is a very good and pleasant thing to think upon, that you really are both returning to us so unexpectedly soon. I had thought there was no hope of such a thing till the summer after next – and that seemed such a very long way off.

As you have actually booked your passage I conclude that is only something quite exceptional and unforeseen that could prevent your coming, though you do imply that there is just the possibility even just of your changing your minds. We can only hope that circumstances of that description will kindly be conspicuous by their absence – unless I suppose they should happen to be particularly desirable from other points of view.

It will be delightful to be an united family once again, and this time in a little home of our own! Your impressions of Cameron House as you last saw it, empty and dim, must be quite vague and indefinite. I have the same mind-picture of it as it then was I expect, only somehow it seems hardly to be connected with what it looks like now. We shall have to do just a little more furnishing before you return, for the number of furnished bedders is not at present quite sufficient to hold the united party! Then too there is the pleasing prospect of you and Mother coming up to pay me a visit here. This place has distinctly romantic associations for you and Mother I believe! It would be jolly to have you both here & go round the place with you.

All goes well with me here. Work seems quite satisfactory at present. At least Mr Bell shows no outward signs of dissatisfaction. What his inward opinions are I do not know. He does not disclose them. I must say he is not a very inspiring man to work for. I am doing Shakespeare chiefly with him, & reading Saintsbury's history of literature.<sup>36</sup> Of course there are all sorts of other things I am doing as well. I go to lectures on "Havelok", Historical Grammar, Anglo Saxon prose, on the language side, & to lectures on "Poetry of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century", "Victorian Poetry", "The Novel", and "Elizabethan Drama of the 16<sup>th</sup> & 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries, excluding Shakespeare" on the literature side. The literature is all most interesting, but the language I find a bit displeasing at present! "Havelok" however is not at all bad.

I have been out with the Beagles twice this week so far. I may be going again tomorrow, but I rather think I shall not. Last Tuesday the meet was at Bleckingdon, about 8 miles away, & yesterday at Kidlington. Yesterday's run was particularly good. I was in at the kill, & the Master – a man

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<sup>36</sup> George Saintsbury, *A History of Elizabethan Literature*. London: Macmillan (1887)

named Gibbs whose rooms are opposite mine – presented me with the mask. I am rather pleased at getting this trophy! The most I had aspired to getting was a pad. I must take it round to the shop where I am going to have it mounted, after posting this. It does not look a pleasing object in it's [sic] present state. I believe it is going to cost me rather a lot to mount!

I have composed & sent off that reply to my Aunt.<sup>37</sup> I was reasonably discreet, but I am afraid my letter was not at all of the humble genus which she seemed to expect. It is a great pity this has happened, but she has been very exasperating & unreasonable. I must close now or shall miss post!

Always your loving son

Harold

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<sup>37</sup> Presumably "Aunt Edie" (Edith Emily Couson James) – see footnote to letter HHJ-21-1.



## 12 Aug 1914 (age 20)

East Court  
Tun. Wells<sup>38</sup>

August 12<sup>th</sup> 1914<sup>39</sup>

My dear Dad

We have not yet had our letters from you this week and it is quite uncertain when they will arrive, but we are hoping to get them sometime soon. At this time everything seems uncertain and disorganised. I suppose you will get our letters from home eventually, tho' I don't know how long they may take to reach you. These are strange days indeed. We did not think this long talked of war would come in our day, did we! Now it is here with a vengeance! Every day there come terrible reports of the fighting round Liège. The loss of life there is shocking. But it is splendid how the Belgians are holding out. The papers are extraordinarily quiet about our own military movements, but there are persistent rumours that they started to land our troops on the continent some days ago. Numbers of spys [sic] are being caught, & there have been various attempted outrages, but none at present successful. Mother and I reached here last Friday, after a moderately eventful journey. Our train at Walmer was taken off suddenly at quite the last moment, & we had a rush to catch another. We also had an unexpected change at Folkestone. From there we travelled on in company with a number of German prisoners under guard. We arrived at T. Wells only a little late. The rest of our party who went to Chilworth<sup>40</sup> arrived four hours late! We leave here again the day after tomorrow.

Aunt Edie seems well and pleasant. She & I have got on quite all right, but I don't think a long stay will ever be advisable! It is a pity. We have been having some jolly weather & it has been pleasing sitting in her garden, which is now looking very bright & tidy. It has been decided that mother and I go to Chilworth on the same day, instead of her coming on a little later, as we don't think it very desirable for her to travel alone in these unsettled conditions.

Aunt E. has had two rather charming old maids to spend the day here today. They told us that some friends of theirs have lately had their whole house suddenly commandeered for the use of soldiers! They were taking all the horses of private people the day we left Walmer, but it must be most trying to have to give up one's house! Mother is well & cheerful, & has been looking specially charming in appearance lately! The family at Chilworth also seem in excellent health and spirits.

I wrote to the headquarters of the O.U.O.T.C.<sup>41</sup> the other day, asking if there were any special arrangements for accepting untrained men to be trained at once. I have today had a reply to say that they are shortly going to arrange for this, & are only waiting for instructions from the War

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38 Home of Harold's aunt Edith Emily Coulson James

39 Britain had declared war on Germany on 4<sup>th</sup> August, following the German invasion of Belgium the previous day.

40 Harold's mother's brother, Rev. Christopher Douglas Hindle, was Vicar of St Denys Church, Chilworth, Hampshire.

41 Oxford University Officer Training Corps

Office. They were saying they are urgently in need of officers for temporary commissions in the Regular Army, & asking if I will accept one of those. Terms of service are, to serve with the army till war is concluded, & any member of the University between 17 and 30 is eligible. They allow one £20 for uniform, & £5 " 15 for equipment. If they will accept me, I am anxious to get a commission, but must find out full particulars first. I saw in the paper that the University authorities were going to make special arrangements for undergrads wishing to serve in the army during the war, & I must find out particulars of this also. Of course it may all fall through, & I may not be successful, but I wonder how you would approve of my doing this? I must write & ask Uncle Leo's advice. It is possible that they will have so many applications that only the select few will be chosen. One feels hateful doing nothing in these sort of times, if men really are wanted, as they imply. Mother seems I think in the main to approve.

Thursday. I must bring this letter to a close now, as I have to get my packing done this afternoon, then go out after tea & make enquiries about trains for tomorrow. It seems that the whole party of us is to return here again after leaving Chilworth, Aunt Lill & I for a couple of nights, & the rest for longer, so we do not say a final good bye to Aunt Edie tomorrow.

I hope we shall get our news from you before long. It seems a very lengthy span of time since we last received letters from you. It is beastly having the mails so irregular.

Mother is shortly going to reply to your wire, & is trying to time it to arrive the first week you will be without home tidings.<sup>42</sup>

Always your loving son

Harold

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42 This illustrates the complications of integrating correspondence between Britain and India both by letter (which took several weeks by sea mail) and by telegram or "wire" which was much faster, and could be used for urgent but brief messages. Presumably Harold's mother's wire response to her husband was actually received well before this letter.

## 31 Dec 1914 (age 20)

Cameron House

Walmer

31 XII 14

Dear old Dad

It is a long time now since I last wrote to you from the above address! It is remarkably pleasing to be at home once more. Cameron House seems a most luxurious establishment after my quarters in the hutments at Witley!<sup>43</sup> Life there has not been of the most comfortable kind lately, with weather such as we have been having for the last three of four weeks. The rain & chilliness & mud has been somewhat the reverse of pleasant I can assure you! However we all keep cheerful, & all goes well in spite of it.

I arrived here yesterday evening at 7.15, having left the camp at 1.15pm, and I am to enjoy the pleasure of being at home with the little family party till Wednesday [6 Jan] afternoon next, when I leave Walmer at about 4.15pm, & reach camp again at 10.30pm. So I have quite a nice long week before me. I hope it won't seem to pass away too rapidly, as pleasant times are apt to do!

However, I don't think we shall be kept at Witley much longer after I get back, but I shall get on to work of a more thrilling type. We are all finding the camp a trifle monotonous now, & want to move on.

I was at home over Xmas day. I was awfully glad not to have to be away for that time. I arrived here in the evening of Christmas Eve, & found a very Xmas like house, prettily decorated with holly etc., & with a very cheerful little family in it to welcome me. I had to return again to camp just for the two days, leaving here on Sunday night [27 Dec].

Xmas day went off quietly but most enjoyably, but we all wished very much that the party might have been quite instead of only partly complete. It would have been so jolly if you would have been with us too, & it made us a little sad to think of you so far away. However our family Xmas party will come off all right some day, & is something for us to look forward to in the future!

The Germans dropped a bomb on Dover by way of a little greeting for Christmas Eve; it did no damage however, beyond making a hole in the ground. I saw placards up about it in Town as I was passing across from Waterloo to Victoria, & it seemed an occurrence I did not quite like to think of so near Cameron House. However there was very little notice taken of it in Walmer really, & no one seems in the least agitated. As a matter of fact I think Walmer is fairly well protected from air raids, or even bombardment by the proximity of Dover, which is a place of much greater importance, & by Deal. If by an extraordinary chance a German man o'war should get to this part of the coast –

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43 About 7 miles south west of Guildford in Surrey

which seems almost an impossibility – it would naturally bombard Deal, as being the main town, rather than Upper Walmer which has the appearance only of a few outlying houses.

I can well imagine that some of the news that has reached you lately of German doings in England, may have come as rather a shock to you. Things always sound worse when read from a newspaper, & when one is a long way off.

Dear old dad, I had your letter this mail which you wrote in reply to mine telling you of my probably near departure for the front. Well, I have not gone yet, but the time is really drawing near now, & I am so glad to have had this letter from you safely. I shall not forget what you say, & I only wish I deserved it more. If I have at any time come through difficulties fairly well, it has not been without your always ready help – and mother's. It is very good to read what you have said, & very cheering. Thanks, Dad, so much. Yes, I think we are indeed "friends".

Always your loving son

Harold

**13 Jan 1915 (age 20)**

Witley Camp  
Nr Goldalming

13.1.15

Dear old Dad

I have a little more time than usual to spare today, so I will start on your letter while I have the opportunity. This morning instead of the usual type of parade, there was a cross country run for our company, & I & two other platoon commanders decided to follow our men on horseback. It rained before the run was over, but all went off well, & I enjoyed my ride very much. This afternoon also, instead of the usual work, there is to be held the first of a series of "bath parades" for the men, as the unpleasant discovery has suddenly been made that there is a prevalence of various kinds of very undesirable insects among the men – not an occurrence greatly to be surprised at, considering the over crowded condition of the hutments! So now there is a process of extermination being carried on, which we officers have to supervise; hardly an attractive job.

Well, I have been back in camp a week today! As you will understand it was fairly beastly saying goodbye to the little home & the very dear people in it, & this is not the most cheering of localities to get back to so late at night – I of course came by the last train. I was as usual welcomed by pouring rain, & deep mud! However one soon cheers up, as the men here are all pleasant & jolly fellows with very few exceptions. One of the exceptions is unfortunately the captain of our company. He is not greatly beloved of anyone, being surly & irritable, as well as being something of a slacker. However, we shall not be going to the front under him I believe, so it does not greatly matter.

I enjoyed my home visit very much indeed. It was a most pleasing & restful week in every way. The little house was looking very cosy & home like. I found all my Oxford possessions there, some already arranged in their new positions, & some, such as my books, waiting to be arranged by me. The drawing room is I think distinctly improved by the addition of my bureau by the window, & my two folding tables & my two high backed chairs. My pictures have also been put up in various parts of the house. It was quite nice to see the old friends again. All the family party seemed v. well & cheerful, & we had a very cosy time together. The parting was unfortunately made harder because we all thought it was to be the last before the front. Officers have been given to understand that Xmas leave was to be the last, & that we were off very soon. Now the date seems very uncertain again, & varies in rumour from the last week of this month to the beginning or middle of March! It is a pity to have to go through unnecessary goodbyes. There were many sad goodbyes on Waterloo platform the night I came back here. It was quite a curious scene. Some of the women – the Tommies' mothers, wives etc. were crying, while others were singing and dancing on the platform in an excited way. My own little mother was very brave, but it was hard to go off and leave her & Auntie looking so sad on the platform at Deal.

It now appears that week-end leave is still to be allowed, so that I may still get another peep at them before I am off.

Yes, this life is certainly very different to one's life up at the House!<sup>44</sup> One is so much one's own master up at Oxford, & can choose one's own "set" & mode of living to a very great extent. Military life, tho' full of energy and interest, has certainly struck me, as you may say, as somewhat narrow in its general outlook. This is not very much felt of course under present conditions, when one is working with a very real and definite object in view, but it would be more noticeable in peace time when all the formalities, & the more petty restrictions of discipline are insisted on without real cause. An of course one does not find much leaning towards a literary atmosphere, or the "love of the sight of mountains" in regard to which I certainly share your feelings. However all goes very well with me. The soldier's job is certainly a grand and noble one to have the honour of taking a part in. I have of course at times felt as you very understandingly suggest, but never badly or for long. You are very clever in realizing how one is likely to be affected by various circumstances!

New hutments are being built for the officers now, & are getting forward towards completion. We shall probably move in shortly. They are far warmer & more weather proof than our present quarters, & each officer is I think to have a little room to himself, which will be quite a pleasing change of conditions, tho' we get a good deal of fun in the "dormitory".

I have again spoke to the Colonel about my aeroplaning prospects, & he still says that I am almost certain to be at least tried for the job sometime before long; but beyond this I know nothing farther! It seems a long time to wait!

Now Dad I must close. We start Battalion training on Friday. This means that all companies will work together on more extensive schemes.

Always your loving son

Harold

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44 Colloquial name for Christ Church college, Oxford

## 28 Jan 1915 (age 20)

6<sup>th</sup> Somerset L.I.  
Witley Camp

28.1.15

My dear Dad

We are having very wintry weather just now. It started last Friday with a heavy snow storm which soon covered the ground with snow to a depth of several inches. It happened unfortunately to be the day chosen for Lord Kitchener to review two Divisions, of which ours was one – we are in the 14<sup>th</sup> Light Infantry Division – . We had to march out some 4 miles in the snow storm to a position in the neighbourhood of Frencham. There were some 19 to 20 thousand men assembled there, & we had to wait a solid two hours before his Lordship turned up to inspect us. It snowed the whole time, & we all became very wet & cold. Many regiments were without overcoats & were soaked to the skin. Our colonel luckily permitted us to wear overcoats. However the men kept wonderfully cheerful, & were singing the whole time. Kitchener sent out a special message of congratulation to all ranks on our “splendid behaviour and discipline in exceptionally trying circumstances!” The exposure is said to have caused the death of two men & an officer next day, but in our battalion no one was the worse for it, & we only developed larger appetites even than usual!

An extra brigade marched in here from a distance just for the night, & we entertained in our mess the officers of the Rifle Brigade. We are just now in a state of much preparedness against a Zeppelin raid, which is supposed to be about to be attempted as a birthday treat for the Kaiser. An officer brought us a message in the middle of mess last evening that an air-raid upon the camp at Aldershot was possibly to be attempted during the night. Preparations were at once made, most of the lights extinguished, & a company of the Durhams told off for firing purposes. All other troops were told to remain quietly inside the huts if anything took place. I hear that all lights were also extinguished in Guildford & Godalming, & no motor car allowed to leave Guildford except with special permission. Some of our officers got stranded there for this reason, & did not get back to camp till about 2 o'clock in the morning! This may sound quite exciting on paper, but no one takes any particular notice of these conditions really, & it is quite curious how the German attempts to “scare” England with her theatrical air invasion fall entirely flat!

As a matter of fact all these preparations are only precautionary measures, & the usual opinion is that an air raid except on the most exposed East Coast towns is most improbable, & that if it is attempted it will be a failure. Yes, I was afraid you might feel a bit uneasy about our little home, & I quite agree with you that there should be a settled plan of action in case of emergency. I talked it over with them when I was home on leave at Xmas, & I think they quite agreed in this. A store of garments etc. is to be kept in one place, so that they can be got at at once, & money & jewellery kept where it is easily got at also, & they could then leave the little house at once & take up refuge

in the cellars of St Clare,<sup>45</sup> where Mr Aston said he would willingly receive them in the event of the almost impossible bombardment. During an air raid I think the hall of Cameron House would be fairly safe, as only the top stairs of so high a house would be likely to suffer from a bomb ... And fortunately the two top stories of Cameron House are unoccupied, when I am away. However I really think Walmer is quite safe at present, & there is no cause for anxiety. So many places are easier and more important to attack.

I had a delightful and unexpected peep of the family the week end before last. They were all, including Lulla, staying at East Court, & I was able to go there on Saturday for the night, which was most jolly. I spent a very pleasant little time with them, & found them and Aunt E. well & cheerful. I hope for further peeps later on.

I am most interested in the new possibilities that have developed with reference to a certain position that has become vacant in India!<sup>46</sup> Aunt E. has taken the matter up, & has written very well about it to Mr Roberts,<sup>47</sup> from whom a quite promising & polite reply has been received by her. Lord Ampthill<sup>48</sup> & others have also been stirred up again. It is really rather excellent, & there is at present more than one way in which Lord Crewe<sup>49</sup> could fulfil his promise of redress to you, he cannot well pretend to be blind to them! I am quite thrilled again, & am so glad the matter is not being allowed to drop. I dare say however that farther news is likely to be some time coming.

We have had to change into other hutments lately for some reason, but not unfortunately into the proper officers' huts. However I rather prefer our new position. We are in an outside line, so that we get a decent view from one end of the hut, instead of being closed in all round.

We narrowly escaped a fire some days ago. There is a space under the hut, where a lot of straw & packing cases had been put, & during the night the sparks from the chimney of a neighbouring hut set this alight. Fortunately one man saw the glow of the flames, & roused us at once. There was a great storm of wind at the time, but we hastened out, clad in night attire, & by pulling out the burning stuff, & pouring water from our camp buckets on it, we put the fire out before it had a hold on the floor of the hut. It was quite exciting!

Now I must close I think. Please excuse the scrawl. Am not writing under comfortable conditions.

Always your loving son

Harold

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45 St Clare School, Upper Walmer; headmaster John Ashton. The building is now private apartments called Leelands House.

46 This is presumably another senior position in educational administration in India, for which H.R. James might have been a candidate.

47 Edith E.C. James had been energetic in trying to pull strings on her brother's behalf. I have not yet identified Mr Roberts, but he was possibly a civil servant in the India Office.

48 Oliver Russell, 2<sup>nd</sup> Baron Ampthill (1869-1935) had served briefly as Viceroy of India in 1904.

49 Robert Crewe-Milnes, 1<sup>st</sup> Marquess of Crewe (1858-1945) was Secretary of State for India from 1910 to 1915.