

Soldier Gordon C. Eby meets Germans

Gordon C. Eby, market gardener, voluntarily enlisted at age 25. He served in the 21st Battalion in France as a signaler from 1917-1919.

Growing up on Mill Street, then on the outskirts of Berlin (Kitchener), Eby was part of a sprawling Mennonite clan which had helped establish both First Mennonite Church and the town in the early 19th century.

Yet like some others of his generation, his personal connection to the Mennonite faith was tenuous. He participated ecumenically in the religious life of Berlin, and had a wide array of Mennonite and non-Mennonite friends, neighbours and business associates.

His diary, kept from 1911-1919, shows a young man curious about new experiences and eager to adopt new technologies. He appears to have enlisted from a more mature sense of duty rather than patriotic fervor. It seems that he was a keen observer and good conversationalist.

These qualities, as well as a knowledge of German, opened doors for him when the 21st was quartered in towns along the Rhine following the Armistice in November 1918. Though reluctant to talk about the war he kept these postcards from German friends, perhaps as a reminder of a more humane end to both the horror and tedium of soldierly life.

Gordon Eby with his mother Catharine (Clemens) Eby in the family greenhouse, 1916

Family lore says Catharine, the more traditionally Mennonite of Gordon's parents, was opposed to his enlistment. She died in 1918 before Gordon returned home.

Gordon's father Christian, who practiced folk medicine, was more amenable. He was purported to have joined the militia during the Fenian Raids of the 1860s.



Gordon C. Eby/ Mennonite Archives of Ontario

SECRET.
Copy No.....
Dec. 19th. 1917.

21st CANADIAN BATTALION OPERATION ORDER No. 150.

Ref Map.
LENS 11. 1/100,000
HAZEBROUCK 5a. 1/100,000.

1. The 21st Canadian Battalion will ~~XXXX~~ move from billets in ESTREE CAUCHIE, on the morning of the 20th inst, and will embuss for billets at AUCHY AU BOIS. (St HILIARE AREA).

21st Battalion operation order to move to Auchy-au-Bois

War diaries, 21st Canadian Infantry Battalion, Library Archives Canada [Full document](#)



German prisoner of war at Auchy-au-Bois, France, December 1917

Eby wrote on back of this postcard:

“Exchange of snaps with a German chap”

Dec. 11, 1918

Flamersheim Rein Land, Germany

Dear Father

Just a few lines to let you know that I am well and hope this finds you people the same. Well I landed in Germany yesterday [from leave in England] and found my battalion....I put in my first days march with them today - we travelled about fifteen miles. The people in this part of Germany are glad the war is over and act very decent and polite.

We generally only stop one night in a village and are billeted in the homes of the people—five or six in the home of a family—we lay down our blankets in one room of the house. They certainly try to please us, for as soon as we arrive they make hot coffee, boiled potatoes and brown bread. That is about all they have. They are very thankful if we give them some white bread biscuits or bully beef.

All of us are glad that we will arrive at our destination in a few days and settle down for a rest and hope to be sent back to Canada soon after. I am interpreter for our company now as well as signaller and often have quite a talk with the natives....



Gordon C. Eby/ Mennonite Archives of Ontario

13/12/18

Siegburg, Germany

Dear Father

Just a line to let you know I am well. And all the boys are glad that our long march is finished. For this forenoon we crossed the “Rhine” river. We will stop in this town for some time. It is quite a nice little city of twenty thousand people and is about seven or eight miles from the Rhine river.

We are billeted in what had been a large German ammunition factory—at one time employed twenty thousand men and women. There are still a small number at work taking ammunition apart so the metal can be used for other purposes....

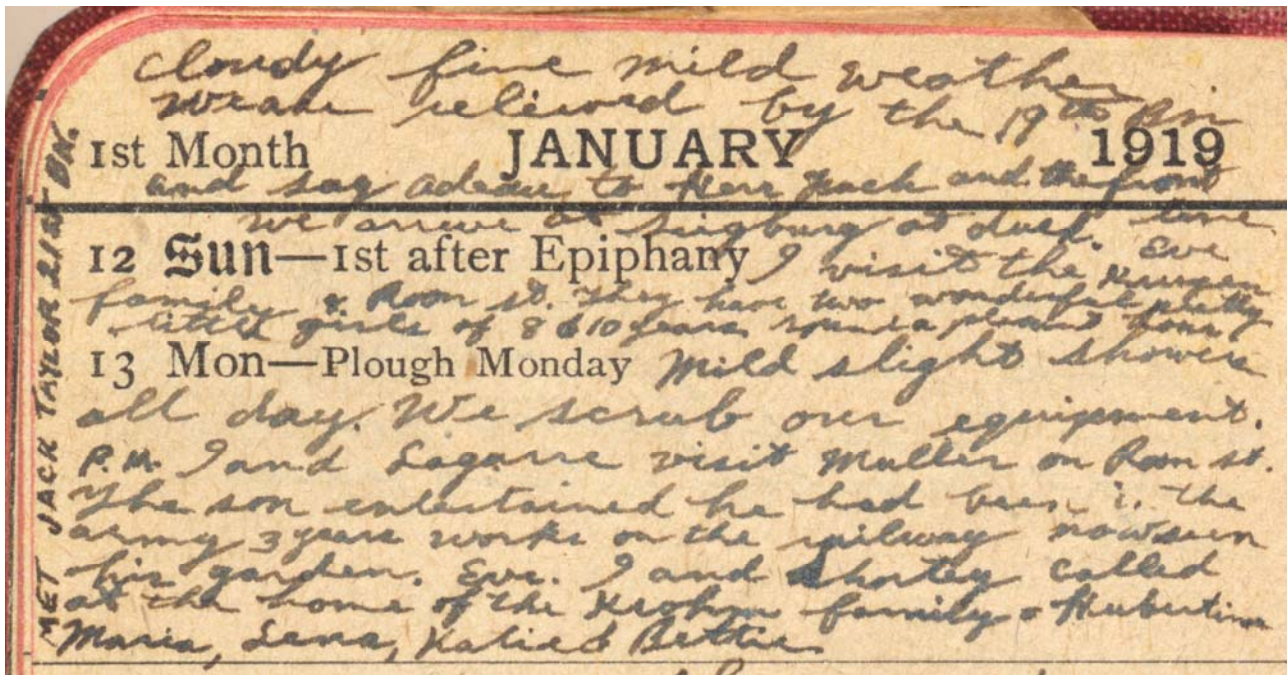
We are still sort of a new thing to the people of these parts, for this is only the third day since the first English or Canadian troops arrived. Everything is being carried out pretty smooth for I haven't seen a row between our troops and the natives since we entered the country.

But we still see a lot of former German soldiers walking about in uniform—they have no other clothes at present. They know they are beaten and never give us any trouble. I have spoken with many Germans, and what seems to be of most important to them is when they will be able to get more and better food....

Your Loving Son Gordon



Gordon C. Eby/ Mennonite Archives of Ontario



Mon. Jan. 13 Mild slight showers all day. We scrub our equipment—p.m. I and Lagarre visit Muller on Roon St. The son entertained—he had been in the army 3 years - works on the railway now—seen his garden. —Eve. I and Shortey called at the home of the Krohn family—Hubertina, Maria, Lena, Katie & Bettie. (Met Jack Taylor 21st Bn.)



Gordon C. Eby/ Mennonite Archives of Ontario

15 Wed Not very much to do. Eve
I and Shorty visit the Krohn family.
I call at Mertens Mr. & Mrs. Elsie
Francisco and Peter. The Mrs
bakes some real potatoe pan cakes
for me. Mr. Mertens sends his
greetings to father at home
myself.

AN OUTDOOR RAT-TRAP. This outdoor rat-trap
is easily made. Get a branch with a good spring in it and
press it into the ground just near the run of the rats.
Attach a piece of string to the branch and to the string

Wed. Jan. 15 Not very much to do.—Eve I and Shorty visit the Krohn family. I call at Mertens—Mr. & Mrs., Elsie, Francisco and Peter.—the Mrs bakes some real potatoe pan cakes for me. Mr. Mertens sends his greetings to my old Father at home.



Gordon C. Eby/ Mennonite Archives of Ontario

Sat. Jan. 18 Fine weather—
a.m. I attend Motor Mec.
Class—p.m. I visit Max—Mr.
& Mrs. Krusen of #8 Roon
St. SIEGBURG. They have
the two prettiest little chil-
dren I have met in Germa-
ny. Elisabeth aged ten
wrote me a little verse in
german in my address
book—I am never to forget
her even if I live to be a
Grandpa. Helena aged
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Mr. Krusen is quite a good singer and Mrs.
is a dress maker, has also a pupil by
the name of Helena. I stay for tea they
seem to be very nice people.
Eve. I and Rowbottom visit Kroms
and Mertens have a very
nice time. I intended to buy some
sourkraut for Bob but forgot.

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Gordon and Elsie Eby at their home at 409 Mill Street, Kitchener, with their first three children, 1920s

Gordon married Elsie Hewitt, the daughter of English immigrants, in 1921. The couple would have eight children. Gordon worked at J. M. Schneider, retiring as an assistant foreman. He kept up gardening as a hobby and developed a new type of apple. He showed a keen interest in local history and his Pennsylvania Mennonite heritage.

His daughter Anne recalls that he did not talk much about the war, and he never kept a diary after 1919. However, he did keep his letters, diaries and photographs from the war period, as well as souvenirs of his leaves in England. These items are now in the Mennonite Archives of Ontario.

His obituary noted that **“two months previous to his death he renewed his faith in Christ.”** Gordon Eby’s funeral service was held in 1965 at First Mennonite Church, where he is also buried.



Gordon C. Eby/ Mennonite Archives of Ontario