

The Great War Diary of Osmond Edward Fisher:
Soldiers' Experience, Popular Narratives, and the Everydayness of War on the Western Front.

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Figure 1. *Osmond Edward Fisher in Uniform*, ca. 1914, Personal collection of the Fisher Family, Windermere, British Columbia.

To work from the assumption that the objective reality of the war was identical to the way contemporaries conceived of it ... is to misconstrue the past. It is to assume that, simply because we judge the First World War to have been an appalling slaughter, people who lived through it must also have judged it in this way. This is clearly an assumption that the historian cannot make. ... the subjects of historical study tend to view their past in terms that do not always correspond to our own images of it. When we assume that they perceived events as we have reconstructed them, we deduce at our peril.¹

- Jonathan F. Vance, *Death So Noble*, 4.

INTRODUCTION

On 11 December 1915, Osmond Edward Fisher, a Private in the 5th Infantry Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) returned to the British Isles for his first leave since arriving at the Western Front (the Front) ten months previously.² For Fisher, the experiences of these ten months were reflected on in his diary in six words: “All my time in the “Smoke.” ”³ By 11 November 1918 this time in the “Smoke” - the theatre of war on the Western Front – had been shared with over 424,000 Canadians who went overseas to fight in the first global conflict

¹ Jonathan F. Vance, *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997), 4.

² Library and Archives Canada (hereafter LAC), Ministry of the Overseas Military Forces of Canada fonds (hereafter cited as LAC, Military fonds), RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 3110 – 35: 391335, Service File, Osmond Edward Fisher (hereafter O.E. Fisher), (Regiment no. 12640, Canadian Overseas Expeditionary Force (hereafter CEF), World War I (hereafter WWI)), “Casualty Form” <https://recherche-collection-search.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/home/record?app=pffww&IdNumber=391335&new=-8585522030259519167>.

³ Osmond Edward Fisher, *Diary of Osmond Edward Fisher*, 4 August 1914 – 4 May 1919, Personal collection of the Fisher Family, Windermere, British Columbia, “11 December 1915.” The diary, together with a full verbatim transcription and footnotes is provided with this thesis in Appendix A.

in history.⁴ By the end of the war, 60,932 Canadians had given their lives and 172,950 were wounded.⁵ Beyond the sacrifice of Canadians on the Western Front, across all theatres of the Great War, an estimated 9.5 to 10 million soldiers were killed and 15.4 to 20 million wounded.⁶ Given the sheer magnitude and carnage of this global event, it is no wonder that as historian Modris Eksteins puts it, “it haunts us still.”⁷

In trying to find the meaning behind this ‘unimaginable’ carnage called the Great War, especially in light of the war that followed only two decades later, countless narratives have been offered. These address the values, attitudes and anxieties (political, nationalistic, and ideological) of social systems for victors and defeated, in order “to fashion a usable past out of the Great War” as historian Jonathan F. Vance put it.⁸ Our understanding of this ‘great’ event has also been shaped by various modes of narrativization, such as literature, history, film and art.⁹ This quest for understanding (and our need for meaning) has yielded a simplified and popular narrative that encompasses an “imaginable and manageable” version of such a seemingly incomprehensible

⁴ Tim Cook, *Shock Troops: Canadians Fighting the Great War, 1917-1918* (Toronto: Viking Canada, 2008), 403, 611, 616; Gerald William Lingen Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919: Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015) 546, 548; Desmond Morton and J. L. Granatstein, *Marching to Armageddon: Canadians and the Great War 1914-1919* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys Limited, 1989), 145-146. While the CEF had a total strength of around 620,000 only around 424,000 served overseas. This number of 620,000 includes around 142,000 conscripts drafted through the Military Service Act instated on 29 August 1917, of which around 24,000 made it to the front before the end of the war.

⁵ Cook, *Shock Troops*, 612.

⁶ Cook, *Shock Troops*, 611.

⁷ Modris Eksteins, “Memory and the Great War,” In *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War*, ed. Hew Strachan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 317.

⁸ Vance, *Death So Noble*, 9.

⁹ Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1989), 325; Eksteins, “Memory and the Great War,” 329.

event.¹⁰ It is against this imaginative event, as identified by historians, that this thesis poses its questions.¹¹

Central to it is the question of who enjoys the authority to determine the meaning of the war.¹² This question is what first sparked historian and World War II veteran Paul Fussell to write his influential work *The Great War and Modern Memory* in 1975, effectively challenging the authority of popular narratives which he termed “modern memory” against that of the testimonies of “those who were there,” that is, the soldiers who had experienced the Front and shared this experience through published literature such as memoirs.¹³ Fussell’s work, as explained by Jay M. Winter, enabled the removal of the “barrier between the literary study of war writing and the cultural history of war.”¹⁴ Through Fussell, historians began to include the published literature of the soldiers in their narratives, “thereby mov[ing] the whole field in a tragic direction, one in which all soldiers were both the agents and the victims of war.”¹⁵ However, this new turn in the Great War historical narrative provoked two important questions. The first asked about how representative of the soldiers’ experience these published testimonies

¹⁰ Samuel Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War* (New York: Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1997), xiii.

¹¹ For major works on the Great War and imagination see: Vance, *Death So Noble*; Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London: The Bodley Head Ltd, 1990); Mark David Sheftall, *Altered Memories of the Great War: Divergent Narratives of Britain, Australia, New Zealand and Canada* (London: I. B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2009); Jay M. Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006); Jay M. Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

¹² Eksteins, “Memory and the Great War,” 320; Jay M. Winter and Antoine Prost, *The Great War in History: Debates and Controversies, 1914 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 173-191.

¹³ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Leonard V. Smith, *The Embattled Self: French Soldiers' Testimony of the Great War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 198.

¹⁴ Jay M. Winter, introduction to *The Great War and Modern Memory*, by Paul Fussell, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), ix.

¹⁵ Winter, introduction to *The Great War*, xi.

were.¹⁶ The second queried the truthfulness of these published testimonies, whether they relayed attitudes and ideas of soldiers during the War or rather those of a later period, particularly under the influence of subsequent attempts to discover the meaning of the war.¹⁷ As historian Leonard V. Smith explains:

We have come to understand the horrors of the trenches of the Great War in a certain way because of the moral authority of those who were there. Subsequent narrations of the Great War as tragedy rested on the borrowed or inherited authority of combatants themselves. Yet this authority would seem to rest on a circular logic. The authority of witnesses derived its legitimacy from forms of experience of which they themselves were the creators and arbiters. ... [A] self-contained system for producing meaning.¹⁸

As Vance suggests, this resulted in a narrative in which “official memory followed where the popular memory had led.”¹⁹ Thus since Fussell, this idea of the “authority of witness” has come under increasing scrutiny along with the popular narratives and imaginings which he critiqued.²⁰

This thesis is less concerned with the authority of a specific narrative or testimony over another than with exploring how immediate representations of the war are distinct from popular narratives, particularly how the former highlights the ‘everydayness’ of the soldiers’ experience.

As another historian and World War II veteran Samuel Hynes explains:

[T]he simplified narrative[s] that evolve from a war, through which it is given meaning ... take their shape at the expense of the particularity and ordinariness of experience, and the inconsistencies and contradictions of human behavior. ... the soldiers’ tale, in its infinite variety, tells the whole story.²¹

¹⁶ Vance, *Death So Noble*, 5-6; Winter and Prost, *The Great War*, 173-191; Desmond Morton, *When Your Number's Up: The Canadian Soldier in the First World War* (Toronto: Random House of Canada, 1993), 277-279.

¹⁷ Vance, *Death So Noble*; Winter and Prost, *The Great War*, 173-191; Smith, *The Embattled Self*, 12; Hynes, *A War Imagined*, 423-463.

¹⁸ Smith, *The Embattled Self*, 198.

¹⁹ Vance, *Death So Noble*, 172.

²⁰ Smith, *The Embattled Self*, 198.

²¹ Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale*, xiii.

One such experience is that of Osmond Edward Fisher, as captured in a diary kept during the war. As will become evident in the analysis of the diary, Fisher's experience is hardly one that can be described as a tale of "mud and blood."²² Rather, it relates what can only be described as the everydayness of the war. Elements of the popular narrative are there, but in Fisher's war, these parts are overshadowed by a number of other themes that together structured his experience of the Great War. The popular narrative, as Smith metaphorically explains, "is like an assembled watch that works well enough but leaves many unincorporated pieces lying alongside on the table."²³ Fisher's diary provides us with pieces that to him represented his experience of the war. And it does so without pre-conceived views or imagined meanings created in hindsight. At the same time, as the analysis in this thesis will show, Fisher's story does not capture actual 'reality' as much as reflect decisions of what to include or exclude, which testify to individual human agency. This needs to be taken into account in assessing the authority of testimony from soldiers in the Great War, even as it provides opportunity for deeper understanding of their experience. The analysis of Fisher's diary offers insights into how the war was apprehended prior to the creation of the popular narrative and into how elements of that apprehension in turn impacted experience. It thereby sheds light on a specific soldier's experience even as it raises questions about what a diary can tell us about the Great War.

Frameworks

As Winter explains: "Every nation that fought in the Great War produced war writing in its own image."²⁴ For the Allies the war often came to be ascribed a rational meaning, such as

²² Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, 153-154.

²³ Smith, *The Embattled Self*, 134.

²⁴ Winter, introduction to *The Great War*, xii.

“the war to end all wars” first to justify the participation in the war and later to justify the loss of life; or in the case of politically divided postwar Canada, it came to mean “the birth of a nation.”²⁵ For Germany, especially “in the face of defeat” as explained by Eksteins, the experience and meaning of the war for veterans such as Adolf Hitler, as he clearly expressed later in his *Mein Kampf*, took on a “spiritual, instead of rational, essence.”²⁶ Yet even within social and geopolitical boundaries those narratives changed, as exemplified through Erich Maria Remarque’s 1929 novel *Im Westen nichts Neues* (All Quiet on the Western Front), whose ideas and “postwar frustration” line up more closely with the pacifist views found in the interwar years.²⁷ There is then no such thing as ‘the War’ even in the popular narrative. What is more appropriate and arguably more useful for our understanding is to approach experience across sociopolitical boundaries to see what was shared and what was distinct.

Approach

According to Smith, “one could argue that the most “realistic” record of experience would be a protracted succession of “nows.” ”²⁸ Although such a succession would be a “confusing and directionless” record of experience, it can be argued that diaries in some way encompass a record of experience resembling it.²⁹ Phillipe Lejeune (drawing on over 40 years of

²⁵ Eksteins, “Memory and the Great War,” 320; Winter and Prost, *The Great War*, 201-202; Cook, *Shock Troops*, 582, 627-631, 644-645; On the topic of Canada and “the birth of a nation” (also sometimes referred to as “the birth of the Canadian nation”) see Tim Cook, *Vimy: The Battle and the Legend* (Toronto: Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 2018); See also Vance, “Chapter 8: To Found a Country” in *Death So Noble*, 226-256. Because of the implementation of conscription through the Military Service Act on 29 August 1917 Canada was heavily politically divided by the end of the war.

²⁶ Eksteins, “Memory and the Great War,” 320, 327; Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, 92.

²⁷ Modris Eksteins, “All Quiet on the Western Front and the Fate of a War” *Journal of Contemporary History* 15, no. 2 (1980): 354-355 <https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/10.1177/002200948001500207>.

²⁸ Smith, *The Embattled Self*, 17.

²⁹ Smith, *The Embattled Self*, 17.

study within the field of diary studies) explains that an important aspect of diaries is the fact that they are written without a known goal in mind, without intent, therefore “[diarists] are writing a text whose ultimate logic escapes [them]; [they] agree to collaborate with an unpredictable and uncontrollable future.”³⁰ This, Lejeune further explains, makes diaries distinct from autobiographical works as the ending here is relatively known before they are composed; they contain longer-term intent while the diary does not.³¹ What Lejeune here observes is also noted by Fussell with regard to capturing the experience of war: “The further personal written materials move from the form of the daily diary, the closer they approach to the figurative and the fictional.”³² Arguably then, the “protracted succession of “nows” ” that make up a daily diary is the closest form of Great War narrative that does not, as Smith calls it, “emplot the witness.”³³ Julie Rak notes, with regards to Lejeune’s observations, that “attempts to interpret diaries as one interprets literary texts or historical accounts of a life will contain what Lejeune says is too much “fiction,” which he understands as too much focus on the organizing principles of a text and not enough focus on process.”³⁴ Jeremy D. Popkin, another significant voice within diary studies explains that “diary writing is necessarily discontinuous, a matter of stringing together disconnected entries. And yet they are related to each other by rhythms of repetition and

³⁰ Philippe Lejeune, *On Diary*, trans. Katherine Durnin, ed. Jeremy D. Popkin and Julie Rak (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009) 30, 204, 208 muse.jhu.edu/book/8351; Julie Rak, “Dialogue with the Future: Philippe Lejeune’s Method and Theory of Diary,” preface to *On Diary*, by Philippe Lejeune, trans. Katherine Durnin, ed. Jeremy D. Popkin and Julie Rak (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), 17-20 muse.jhu.edu/book/8351.

³¹ Lejeune, *On Diary*, 208.

³² Fussell, *The Great War*, 336; In fact, Fussell here also draws parallel to Hayden White’s observations with regards to the medieval annals. See Hayden White, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (1980) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343174>.

³³ Smith, *The Embattled Self*, 17-18.

³⁴ Rak, “Dialogue with the Future,” 20.

variation that may not be obvious to the writer but that appear when the diary is read.”³⁵ What Popkin here explains is observed by Fussell when discussing the capture of the experience of war by diarists Lillian Hellman and Robert Kee.³⁶ The self-reflection by Hellman and Kee on their diaries clearly highlights this notion of (lack of) emplotment. While they recorded their experience because of an awareness of the importance of the events in which they had found themselves, without knowing the outcome – ‘the plot’ – the historical distinctiveness that was ‘supposed’ to be present in the experience they so diligently recorded did not represent itself in the way it was ‘supposed to.’³⁷ In hindsight “what the passing years ha[d] made important” did not reflect the meaning of their day-to-day narration of the story.³⁸ Unpublished daily diaries, even when written for the sole purpose of recording an event which has an already established level of importance (and thus also already ideas of significance and meaning) are the closest thing to a real version of a succession of “nows.”³⁹

³⁵ Jeremy D. Popkin, “Philippe Lejeune, Explorer of the Diary,” preface to *On Diary*, by Philippe Lejeune, trans. Katherine Durnin, ed. Jeremy D. Popkin and Julie Rak (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2009), 9 muse.jhu.edu/book/8351.

³⁶ Fussell, *The Great War*, 336-337.

³⁷ Fussell, *The Great War*, 336-337.

³⁸ Fussell, *The Great War*, 337.

³⁹ Smith, *The Embattled Self*, 17.

CHAPTER ONE: Contextualization

Locating Fisher

Osmond Edward Fisher (18 April 1895-July 1948) was born and raised in Dublin, Ireland.⁴⁰ He moved to Indian Head, Saskatchewan, Canada with his mother in 1912 at age 16 or 17.⁴¹ Fisher's attestation papers suggest that he was part of the 16th Light Horse, a local Saskatchewan militia for at least one year prior to enlisting in the CEF.⁴² According to his son William 'Bill' Fisher, he was close with local Presbyterian Reverend Thomas McAfee, whom he mentions in the diary.⁴³ Bill Fisher suggests that Osmond Edward Fisher helped out with farm work in the area which explains his notation of "Farmer" as occupation on his CEF attestation papers.⁴⁴ The overall level of writing and the only occasional occurrence of spelling mistakes in the diary suggest that he at least received some form of primary education.⁴⁵ Fisher volunteered for active service following the outbreak of war and enlisted with the CEF on 19 September 1914

⁴⁰ LAC, Military fonds, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 3110 – 35: 391335, Service File, O.E. Fisher, (Regiment no. 12640, CEF, WWI), "Attestation Paper"; James 'Jim' Fisher (Youngest son of O. E. Fisher), in phone conversation with the author, April 6, 2022.

⁴¹ James 'Jim' Fisher (Youngest son of O. E. Fisher), in phone conversation with the author, April 6, 2022.

⁴² LAC, Military fonds, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 3110 – 35: 391335, Service File, O.E. Fisher, (Regiment no. 12640, CEF, WWI), "Attestation Paper"; LAC, Department of Militia and Defense Fonds, RG 9-II-B-3, Volume 79: 2006085, Canadian Expeditionary Force - 2nd Infantry Brigade Headquarters and 5th Battalion - Nominal Roll of Officers, Non-Commissioned Officers and Men, 1915, 3 <https://recherche-collection-search.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/home/record?app=fonandcol&IdNumber=2006085&new=-8585522266588187017>

⁴³ William 'Bill' Fisher (Oldest son of O. E. Fisher), in phone conversation with the author, November 25, 2021; Indian Head History Book Committee, *Indian Head: History of Indian Head and District* (Regina, Saskatchewan: Brigidens Photo Graphics Limited, 1984), 119; Fisher, *Diary*, "13 January 1917." Osmond Edward Fisher refers here to Thomas McAfee as "Uncle Tom."

⁴⁴ William 'Bill' Fisher (Oldest son of O. E. Fisher), in phone conversation with the author, November 25, 2021; LAC, Military fonds, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 3110 – 35: 391335, Service File, O.E. Fisher, (Regiment no. 12640, CEF, WWI), "Attestation Paper."

⁴⁵ Fisher, *Diary*; James 'Jim' Fisher (Youngest son of O. E. Fisher), in phone conversation with the author, April 6, 2022. This is also suggested by James 'Jim' Fisher, Osmond Edward Fisher's youngest son, who suggests that he likely attended high school in Dublin, although the author of this paper was unable to find any sources confirming this.

at the age of 19.⁴⁶ He joined, with the rank of Private, the 2nd Infantry Brigade, 5th Battalion, in the First out of the eventual four Canadian Divisions to fight in the First World War.⁴⁷ Fisher was part of the first official CEF force to arrive in France in February 1915 and remained on the Western Front for the entirety of Canada's involvement, fighting in France and Belgium, and after the Armistice serving as part of the Army of Occupation in Germany until January 1919.⁴⁸ His service records do not indicate that he was wounded during his time of service.⁴⁹

The 5th Canadian Infantry Battalion participated in a substantial number of offensive actions on the Western Front throughout the war: Second Ypres (April 1915), Festubert (May 1915), Mount Sorrel (June 1916), Thiepval Ridge (Sept 1916), Vimy Ridge (April 1917), Arleux (April 1917), Hill 70 (August 1917), Passchendaele (October-November 1917), and Amiens (August 1918).⁵⁰ Fisher was a transport driver with the 5th Battalion's horse transport company

⁴⁶ LAC, Military fonds, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 3110 – 35: 391335, Service File, O.E. Fisher, (Regiment no. 12640, CEF, WWI), "Attestation Paper"; Fisher, *Diary*, "August 1914."

⁴⁷ Canadian Contingent Pay and Record Office, *List of Officers and Men Serving in the First Canadian Contingent of the British Expeditionary Force, 1914* (London: Printed by authority of the ministry, Overseas Military Forces of Canada, 1919), 62; LAC, Military fonds, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 3110 – 35: 391335, Service File, O.E. Fisher, (Regiment no. 12640, CEF, WWI). There was briefly a Fifth Division but this never reached the front and was instead broken up to fill the ranks of the already existing divisions. See Cook, *Shock Troops*, 18, 262. A Division is also sometimes referred to as a Contingent.

⁴⁸ LAC, Military fonds, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 3110 – 35: 391335, Service File, O.E. Fisher, (Regiment no. 12640, CEF, WWI), "Discharge Certificate," "Casualty Form"; Tim Cook, *At the Sharp End: Canadians Fighting the Great War, 1914-1916* (Toronto: Viking Canada, 2007), 88-97; Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force*, 528-530. The CEF remained in Europe as part of the Allies' Army of Occupation until January 1919. See Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force*, 529. The Princess Patricia's Light Infantry were the first Canadian troops to arrive in France, arriving in December 1914 but this unit fell under the command of the British Expeditionary Force rather than the Canadian and did not fall under the CEF until April 1915. See Cook, *At the Sharp End*, 88-89.

⁴⁹ LAC, Military fonds, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 3110 – 35: 391335, Service File, O.E. Fisher, (Regiment no. 12640, CEF, WWI). The "1914-1918 Roll of Honour Indian Head and District" also lists Fisher as not wounded. See Indian Head History Book Committee, *Indian Head*, 165.

⁵⁰ Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force*. For 5th Battalion engagements see Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force*, for Second Ypres: 57, for Festubert: 101-102, for Mount Sorrel: 147-152, for Thiepval Ridge: 177, for Vimy Ridge: 253, for Arleux: 271, for Hill 70: 290-291, for Passchendaele: 325-326, for Amiens: 412. For total duration (i.e. exact dates) of these engagements see Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force*, 554-555. These dates do not specify exact days of combat for the 5th Battalion which is why the author of this paper has decided to note their occurrence in the months in which they took place. For further information on the battles and 5th Battalion's engagements see Cook, *At the Sharp End*; Cook, *Shock Troops*.

which explains his frequent reference to horses in his diary.⁵¹ His duties thus entailed moving supplies to and from the reserve and front lines in the trenches.⁵² As the diary shows, these were central to his experience. While definitely a more favorable duty than an infantryman or light machine gunner, members of battalion transport companies spent significant time within the active shelling lines and went over the parapet during major offenses.⁵³ Entries pertaining to the wounded, loss of life, getting shelled out, and accounts of participating in offensives are all found in Fisher's diary.⁵⁴ However, as suggested by the frameworks discussed in the previous sections, these entries do not represent the dominant elements of his experience of the war.

By the end of the war Fisher had justly become part of what was known as the "Old Originals," those first men sent overseas that managed to survive the entire war, even though Fisher had just turned 24 years old when he returned to Canada.⁵⁵ Within the 5th Battalion, 'obtaining' this title meant that you had to be one of the 68 out of the initial 1100 men who

⁵¹ Canadian Contingent Pay and Record Office, *List of Officers and Men*, 62; Fisher, *Diary*; Fisher, *Diary*; James 'Jim' Fisher (Youngest son of O. E. Fisher), in phone conversation with the author, April 6, 2022. Jim Fisher also suggests that Osmond Edward Fisher was naturally good with horses which might also help explain the occurrence of horses in the diary.

⁵² The Ministry of Overseas Military Forces of Canada, *Report of the Ministry: Overseas Military Forces of Canada, 1918* (London: Printed by authority of the ministry, Overseas Military Forces of Canada, 1918), 197. Official functions of transport personnel within the infantry battalions as listed in 1918 per The Ministry of Overseas Military Forces of Canada: "Transport personnel, which is responsible for such duties as hauling rations from the Battalion Headquarters to the men in the line or in billets, forming dumps of rations and ammunition in the forward areas, carrying the light machine guns on the line of march, carrying reserve ammunition and bombs, and so forth."

⁵³ Fisher, *Diary*; Cook, *At the Sharp End*, 89-93, 99-102; Andrew Iarocci, "Engines of War: Horsepower in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-18," *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research* 87, no. 349 (2009): 67 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44231643>; Dave Sweeney, "Beasts of Burden: Horse Transport on the Western Front" (MDS thesis, Canadian Forces College, 2013) 25-30. <https://www.cfc.forces.gc.ca/259/290/299/286/sweeney.pdf>. For other accounts of battalion horse transport drivers see Reginald H. Roy ed., *The Journal of Private Fraser: 1914-1918 Canadian Expeditionary Force*. (Victoria: Sono Nis Press, 1985); Charles E. Burgess, and Yvonne S. Burgess eds., *Who Said War is Hell!* (Saskatoon: Modern Press, 1983).

⁵⁴ Fisher, *Diary*.

⁵⁵ Morton, *When Your Number's Up*, 246; LAC, Military fonds, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 3110 – 35: 391335, Service File, O.E. Fisher, (Regiment no. 12640, CEF, WWI), "Discharge Certificate."

arrived in France on 15 February 1915.⁵⁶ The survival rate was just 6.18%.⁵⁷ Fisher's survival alone is extraordinary, which makes the fact that he recorded his experience even more so.

Locating Fisher's Diary

While 'selected' literary excerpts of diaries have often been used to paint a picture of soldiers' experiences on the Front, I hope that the sections above have shown the problematic nature of such an approach which in essence examines the sources through the already established narratives, rather than approaching them on their own terms and as their own type of narrative. In light of the frameworks and considerations outlined in the sections above, I aim to take a more analytical approach to identify from the 502 entries of Fisher's record the topics and themes that together paint an overall picture of his experience, rather than reducing them to themes familiar from the popular narratives.⁵⁸ (The bulk of this analytical approach is in Chapter Two).

As Fisher clearly notes by writing the word "DIARY" in capital letters in his notebook, we can be sure that for Fisher his testimony was in fact a diary and can thus be studied as one.⁵⁹ The diary covers a period of 4 years and 10 months of which Fisher spent 3 years, and just over 7

⁵⁶ Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan (hereinafter PAS), Victor N. Swanston fonds, R-41.4, File 18, "All that remained of the Original 5th Battalion of 1100 men, World War 1," Picture, ca. January 1918.
https://www.saskarchives.com/Swanston_5th_Battalion

⁵⁷ $(68 / 1100) \times 100\% = 6.18\%$

⁵⁸ At the end of writing this thesis I came across an MA thesis study by Ashley Grace Dennis-Henderson who conducted an advanced data driven analytical approach using different modes of computational techniques to analyze 557 transcribed Australian First World War diaries. While the study falls primarily within the field of computer and mathematical sciences rather than history, given that the current thesis undertakes a similar approach, (albeit far more rudimentary) it merits mentioning here. The study by Dennis-Henderson also speaks to the efficacy of the approach taken by the current thesis. See Ashley Grace Dennis-Henderson, "Analysis of World War One Diaries using Natural Language Processing" (MS thesis, The University of Adelaide, 2020)
<https://hdl.handle.net/2440/129622>.

⁵⁹ Fisher, *Diary*, "December 1916." The actual location of this notation is significant and will be discussed further below.

months, on the Front between his arrival in France on 15 February 1915 and the Armistice on 11 November 1918.⁶⁰ The diary contains roughly 502 individual entries spread over a period of 58 months with the first entry dated to 4 August 1914 reading:

4th War declared
Vol for active service.⁶¹

Fisher's last entry, dated to 27 May 1919, two days after his official discharge from the CEF, simply states "Civilians" suggesting his return to Canadian society.⁶² These two entries indicate that for Fisher the experience he associated with the war did not end at the Armistice but rather continued until he returned home. Thus the diary is framed by a beginning and end, as a personal journey.

Fisher's diary shows broad parallels with other diaries as will be discussed in the next section, but it is unique in terms of the pattern and frequency of entries. For the full period from 4 August 1914 to 27 May 1919, the 502 entries are spread out very unevenly as can be seen in the figure below.

⁶⁰ LAC, Military fonds, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 3110 – 35: 391335, Service File, O.E. Fisher, (Regiment no. 12640, CEF, WWI), "Medical History Sheet," "Casualty Form." Between 15 February 1915 and 11 November 1918 Fisher had a total of 46 days leave and 10 days in the hospital because of sickness, meaning that he spent a total of 1280 out of the 1336 days between 15 February 1915 and 11 November 1918 on the Western Front during the theatre of war.

⁶¹ Fisher, *Diary*, "4 August 1914." I use the term "roughly" here as some entries did not forgo an exact date therefore I had to use my best judgement (looking at the context, pencil characteristics, and sentence structures) for some entries to decide whether they counted as a single entry or two separate entries. This only resulted in a possible extra entry in 12 out of the 58 months (so a maximum of 12 more entries). I opted to count the maximum possible amount of entries for the entire diary as to prevent the possibility of entries that were meant to stand independently to be excluded from the sample retain statistical insignificance for the additional entries by treating them all equally for each possible occurrence in order to prevent the possibility of entries intended to stand independently to be excluded from the sample. In reality the number of entries is thus at maximum 502 entries and at minimum 490 entries (a 2.42% difference).

⁶² Fisher, *Diary*, "27 May 1919."

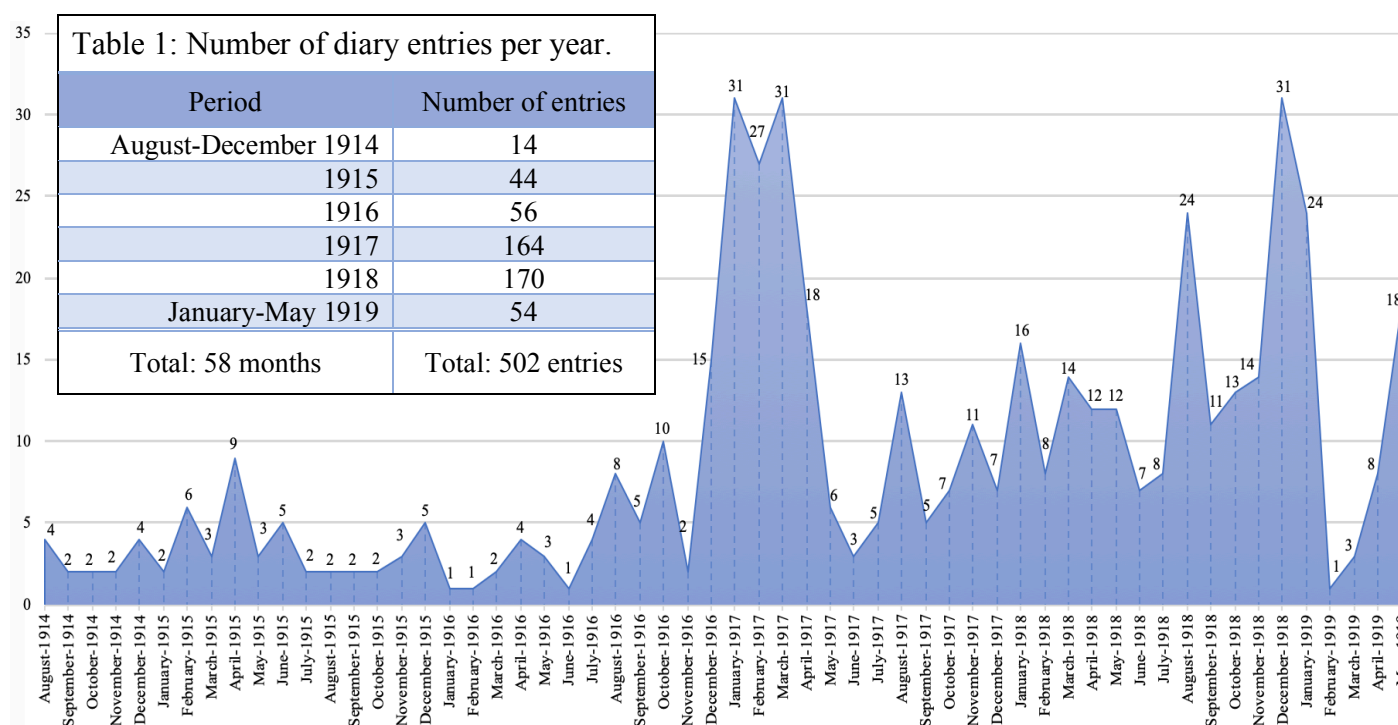


Figure 2: Displaying the entries per month for the entire range of Fisher's diary From August 1914 to May 1919.

As can be seen clearly in the figure, the entries increase significantly after November 1916. This noticeable shift in the frequency of entries can be explained by the fact that, as I discovered through my analysis, it looks like Fisher did not actually start keeping a 'daily' diary until 18 December 1916.⁶³ On the page with the December 1916 entries Fisher writes the word "DIARY" as the top centre heading.⁶⁴ It is a word that has not appeared on previous pages and is never mentioned again. Its location, precisely at the centre of the notebook, indicated by the bookbinding visible there, suggest why Fisher's earliest dated entry of 4 August 1914 does not start until page 11 of the diary, and why the final 6 months are actually located in front of this earliest dated entry.⁶⁵ It appears that as Fisher ran out of space at the end of the notebook in

⁶³ Fisher, *Diary*, "December 1916." 18 December 1916 is the earliest dated entry for December 1916, he does not have any entries for this month prior to this date.

⁶⁴ Fisher, *Diary*, "December 1916."

⁶⁵ See Appendix A

November 1918 he went back to pages he had left blank at the front of it. The diary is thus in a way two diaries. One written in the day-to-day based on his recent, or daily, experiences, and one written in a reflexive manner, backtracking his first two years of experience of the war.

This suggests a number of significant things about the contents of the source as well as the meaning and intention of the diary. If Fisher did not start to write until December 1916, the fact that he chose to start in the middle of the notebook suggests that he preconceived backtracking to record elements of the previous two years of the war and deliberately left space to do that.⁶⁶ The considerable amount of empty space in the entries from 1914 to December 1916 confirms this, as does the sometimes varying sharpness and thickness of Fisher's pencil between parts of entries in this range. Also crossing out of certain entries followed by their relocation elsewhere within this period suggests that he came back to this part of the diary, possibly as he remembered details over time.⁶⁷ This in turn suggests that Fisher's pre-December 1916 diary entries entail a level of broader reflection based on Fisher's experience of the war up until that

⁶⁶ It might also suggest that Fisher thought that by December 1916 the war was at least halfway to being over, leaving enough space in the second half of the notebook for the time yet to come.

⁶⁷ For example see Fisher, *Diary*, "16 October 1914." This entry reads "Landed in Devonport entrained for Aymesbury & West Down South [*sic*]." "West Down South" here has clearly been entered earlier than the portion before it (i.e. pencil characteristics for "West Down South" are similar as those in the preceding and following months but the "Landed in Devonport entrained for Aymesbury &" are clearly done with a sharper or fresher pencil point. The "&" character in the entry clearly connects the two parts together thus pertaining that they belong to the same entry, although clearly written at separate times. In this same part of the diary you can also see that the month and year notation for October and November 1914 are different from the entries within these periods, which when taking into consideration that he backtracked from December 1916 to August 1914 suggests that Fisher allocated the positioning of the months in this part of the diary first before writing down entries within them. This also explains the crossed out entry under January 1916 which actually belonged to January 1915. It is probable that Fisher working on space allocation and trying to remember when he did what (getting the month right, but not the year in this case). Fisher's notation of "Flamentinge" on 26 April 1915 also suggests this remembering and updating of entries not really completed. "Flame" and "ntinge" while connected and one word are written with different thickness of pencil, which suggests that Fisher might have not been fully confident on how to spell the name thus only writing it down partially - "Flame" - and coming back to the entry after finding out or remembering its proper spelling, thus adding "ntinge." See Fisher, *Diary*, "26 April 1915."

point. Aware of the ‘plot’ to that point, Fisher summarized and generalized. After that he became a daily diarist.

The pre-December 1916 entries offer insight into what Fisher saw as important in retrospect. Deliberate construction of the diary in terms of space and later reconstruction of the early years are evidence that Fisher wanted to remember this part of his experience; also that he may have had a preconceived idea of what the diary was supposed to mean for him as well as that it should encompass his personal experience in the Great War.⁶⁸ (He had some idea of the storyline, but did not know and could not know whether it would end in life or death). What enthusiasm for war Fisher might have felt initially was conceivably suppressed by the experience of two years on the Front. The early years of the diary thus need to be read in a somewhat different light. It is noteworthy that only in this part of the diary is there reflexive prose, as in “Nothing unusual” for the months of October and November 1915, and “One year in France” on 15 February 1916.⁶⁹ This reflexive part of the diary will be further discussed in Chapter Two. The high frequency of entries from December 1916 until April 1917 can possibly be explained by the relative newness and possible excitement of keeping a diary. However, as the final section of this paper will show, there are also other factors in terms of his ‘actual’ experience that seem to have had an influence on the frequency of the diary’s entries.

⁶⁸ Fisher’s earliest dated entry and last dated entry strengthen this impression, with “Vol for active service” and “Civilians” perfectly encapsulating his experience as a Canadian soldier. See Fisher, *Diary*, “4 August 1914,” “27 May 1919.”

⁶⁹ Fisher, *Diary*, “October 1915,” “November 1915,” “15 February 1916.”

Pocket Diaries

The notebook in which Fisher made his entries can be categorized as a pocket diary; a small notebook “about the size of a modern credit card.”⁷⁰ The size of Fisher’s notebook measures eight by twelve centimeters.⁷¹ This type of diary was a popular choice among soldiers on the front as they had little space to carry around anything more than their essential kit.⁷² With soldiers being actively discouraged from keeping diaries during the war, out of concern that they might leak sensitive information if captured by the enemy, the size of the pocket diary also allowed for easy concealment from army officials.⁷³ Through the extensive notation of location and movement in Fisher’s diary, it can be assumed that Fisher was not significantly influenced by the official attitudes towards soldiers’ diaries.⁷⁴ This in turn also suggests that Fisher expected a certain level of privacy with his entries, at least from the army’s censors.

However, as historian Aaron W. Moore explains regarding pocket diaries in World War II, while their small size “allowed their authors to transport them under any conditions ...[, they] provid[ed] precious little space for expansive prose.”⁷⁵ This also explains why there is a noticeable difference in the historical record between the diaries of officers and soldiers, as Moore notes that the formers’ “large, tablet-sized diary note pads ... ha[d] enough space for copying action reports, telegraphed orders, troop position, and events of the day, but they were

⁷⁰ Marilyn Shevin-Coetzee and Frans Coetzee, *Commitment and Sacrifice: Personal Diaries from the Great War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 5.

⁷¹ Maureen Thorpe (Partner of Jim Fisher), in phone conversation with the author, 6 April 2022.

⁷² Shevin-Coetzee and Coetzee, *Commitment and Sacrifice*, 5; Aaron William Moore, *Writing War: Soldiers Record the Japanese Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 12-13 <https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/10.4159/harvard.9780674075399>; Stephen Bull, *Trench: A History of Trench Warfare on the Western Front* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2010), 63.

⁷³ Shevin-Coetzee and Coetzee, *Commitment and Sacrifice*, 3; Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, 233-234.

⁷⁴ Fisher, *Diary*.

⁷⁵ Moore, *Writing War*, 12-13.

more difficult to carry and were usually kept only by officers or medical personnel.”⁷⁶ More extensive and sometimes literary prose was thus possible in the physically larger diaries kept and produced predominantly by officers, who, with higher levels of education and different experiences than regular soldiers, are disproportionately overrepresented in later published narratives, testimonies and memoirs.⁷⁷ This is part of the question about how representative of the soldiers’ experience published testimonies were as identified in the introduction, with Vance pointing to historians “us[ing] aesthetic standards to decide which pieces of literature deserve consideration.”⁷⁸ In the case of Fisher’s diary, over 90% of the entries are shorter than 12 words.⁷⁹ Because of the inclusion and exclusion of testimonies within the popular narratives through aesthetic standards, pocket diaries like that of Fisher are likely to be ignored in representing the soldiers’ experience.

This limitation in writing space did not, however, necessarily equate to a limitation in the value and insight of these accounts. As Emily James and Rachel M. Busse note in their analysis of the use of pocket diaries in *Jacob’s Room* by Virginia Woolf, which, although fictional is nonetheless relevant in this case, “what Woolf’s narrator took pages to describe, Clara has compressed into eleven words [in her pocket diary]” thus showing its effectiveness even with limited space.⁸⁰ Historians Marilyn Shevin-Coetzee and Frans Coetzee, in their narrativization of six First World War diaries of soldiers from different social and geopolitical settings, also see a

⁷⁶ Moore, *Writing War*, 13.

⁷⁷ Because they contain better prose, they are more widely circulated and published, and therefore they are more easily accessible and more accessed by historians, thus dominating the sampling of Great War testimonies.

⁷⁸ Vance, *Death So Noble*, 6.

⁷⁹ Fisher, *Diary*. The diary contains 40 entries with more than 12 words; or $(40 / 502) \times 100\% = 7.97\%$ of entries are over 12 words, thus, at least 90% of entries have a length of below 12 words.

⁸⁰ Emily James and Rachel M. Busse, “The Forms of War: Pocket Diaries and Post Cards in *Jacob’s Room*,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 42, no. 1 (2018): 11-12 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/jmodelite.42.1.01>.

certain strength in the “use of such modest materials,” noting that these types of diary accounts, (and diaries kept during the war in general) “manifest a raw immediacy that memoirs, recalled at a distance, composed after the fact, perhaps edited or amended as prevailing attitudes then dictated, simply cannot match.”⁸¹ The observation made by Shevin-Coetzee and Coetzee here ties in clearly with the arguments in the previous parts of this thesis situating the unpublished and ‘private’ daily diary, or rather, the recording of experience as it happened, as a valuable source for the development of our understanding of the soldiers’ experience without the frameworks of meaning found in published testimonies.

The pocket diary thus necessitated minimalistic prose but did not restrict the range of experience recorded. While some, such as British sapper John French analyzed in the work of Shevin-Coetzee and Coetzee, filled a number of pocket diaries to record their experience on the Front, others, such as Fisher, were satisfied with a single diary to record their entire experience.⁸² For Fisher, this meant that sixty small pages, each containing eighteen lines, was sufficient to record his war experience. By way of contrast, for British Corporal John Henry Kelty of the 17th Manchester Regiment, a pocket diary took the shape of two pieces of paper, folded through the middle and placed together, which gave him eight pages covering a period from 3 July to 5 September of 1916.⁸³

Besides variety in how much one was willing to write, there was also in some cases variety in allocation of how much one was able to write. James and Busse explain that certain types of pocket diaries, such as the Collin’s or Lett’s brand, actively limited one’s creative space

⁸¹ Shevin-Coetzee and Coetzee, *Commitment and Sacrifice*, 5.

⁸² Shevin-Coetzee and Coetzee, *Commitment and Sacrifice*, 5; Fisher, *Diary*.

⁸³ The Great War Archive. University of Oxford. “The diary of Corporal John Henry Kelty,” First World War Poetry Digital Archive. <http://ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/items/show/6098>. (possibly stopped writing as this is when his brother dies).

by pre-allocating the date and writing area for an entire year.⁸⁴ James and Busse argue that because of this allocation of space this brand of pocket diary imposed a sort of automatic “self-censorship” on the soldiers who used them.⁸⁵ This would have thus had an effect on the contents of these branded types of diaries. Given that Fisher’s pocket diary was simply a blank notebook he was hypothetically able to write as much as he wanted, yet with 90% of his entries being under twelve words and limited to only one line per page, it seems reasonable to suggest some form of self-censorship as suggested by James and Busse. However, given that Fisher’s longest entry, 42 words, spanned over half a page, it seems that rather than being limiting in the length of his entries he did not generally find it necessary to write extensively.⁸⁶

By way of comparison, the pocket diary of CEF Private Samuel Henry Brown was a brand diary of the type noted by James and Busse.⁸⁷ Brown, who was part of the Second Canadian Division, 4th Machine Gun Company, served on the Western Front from 13 March 1917 until he was fatally wounded in the battle of Hill 70 on 20 August 1917.⁸⁸ Using the Collin’s brand pocket diary to record his experience, Brown was constricted to only four lines of space per daily entry.⁸⁹ Yet he did not actually fill the majority of this available space, with many of his entries being only one or two lines and leaving many days completely empty.⁹⁰ He also

⁸⁴ James and Busse, “The Forms of War,” 13-14.

⁸⁵ James and Busse, “The Forms of War,” 5, 13-14.

⁸⁶ Fisher, *Diary*, “27 September 1917.”

⁸⁷ Veterans Affairs Canada (hereafter VAC), The Canadian Virtual War Memorial (hereafter CVWM), Private Samuel Henry Brown Digital Collection, Diary, 1917, <https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/memorials/canadian-virtual-war-memorial/detail/496995?Samuel%20Henry%20Brown> (5 January 2022).

⁸⁸ LAC. Military fonds. RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 1177 - 57: 70206, Service File, Samuel Henry Brown (Regiment no. 654009, CEF, World War I), “Casualty Form,” <https://recherche-collection-search.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/home/record?app=pffww&IdNumber=70206&new=-8585522130735567756>; VAC, CVWM, Private Samuel Henry Brown Digital Collection, Diary. The 1917 Collin’s pocket diary thus contains the only entries available for Brown’s experience at the Front.

⁸⁹ VAC, CVWM, Private Samuel Henry Brown Digital Collection, Diary.

⁹⁰ VAC, CVWM, Private Samuel Henry Brown Digital Collection, Diary.

used ditto marks to indicate his experience over multiple days.⁹¹ Fisher too did not record every day, frequently used ditto marks, and sometimes allocated a range of dates to a single description.⁹² In both Brown's and Fisher's experience of the war, there thus appear to have been many days for which a specific record was not considered necessary, and many for which no record was kept at all. Given that, as Shevin-Coetzee and Coetzee note, soldiers "sometimes had to wait several days until they had an opportunity to record their experiences," leaving empty space is significant insofar as it suggests that they kept open the possibility of going back and filling in gaps in the record.⁹³ Not filling these gaps in presumably also reflects a conscious decision. The acknowledgement of these empty days is especially clear in branded pocket diaries like that of Brown where dates and space are already allocated. These deliberate omissions show certain parallels with the gaps in medieval annals as analyzed by historian Hayden White.⁹⁴ The presumption is not that nothing happened, but that it did not merit recording.⁹⁵ The empty space present in Fisher's diary since the start of his 'daily' diary post-December 1916 indirectly tells us about aspects of his experience. By taking it all together, the empty in light of the recorded, we come to understand *Fisher's* experience. By recording what he considered worthy of note, and by leaving out certain parts of his actual experience (as will be discussed in the final section), Fisher affirmed his subjectivity and agency. Thus, as historian Joan W. Scott argued in her

⁹¹ VAC, CVWM, Private Samuel Henry Brown Digital Collection, Diary, "June 1917."

⁹² See Fisher, *Diary*.

⁹³ Shevin-Coetzee and Coetzee, *Commitment and Sacrifice*, 5.

⁹⁴ White, "The Value of Narrativity."

⁹⁵ White, "The Value of Narrativity," 13-15. White here analyses the *Annals of St. Gail* and suggests that even though the record contains white space, the continuation of dating suggests that, "[n]onetheless, there must be a story since there is surely a plot - if by 'plot' we mean a structure of relationships by which the events contained in the account are endowed with a meaning by being identified parts of an integrated whole. By the plot of this story ... I am referring to the list of dates given in the left-hand file of the text which confers coherence and fullness on the events by registering them under *the years in which they occurred*." See White, "The Value of Narrativity," 13. Given that Fisher's diary contains 'daily' entries up to 27 May 1919, even though there are gaps, the diary makes up an integrated whole. See Fisher, *Diary*.

critical poststructuralist work “The Evidence of Experience”: “it is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience.”⁹⁶ Fisher is thus a subject of his own experience rather than simply relaying objective experience itself. Also helpful here is Moore’s observation that “the context in which war diaries are produced makes them difficult to separate from their authors as objects of analysis.”⁹⁷ Diaries are thus as much about the individual to whom the experience pertains as they are about the experience itself. As Moore observes, “When a soldier believed his diary to be a true reflection of his experience, how he narrated his own story inevitably affected his ideas about himself and the world around him.”⁹⁸ These sources are thus a subjective reflection of the actual. The succession of “nows” that are recorded provide a pattern from which to grasp the meaning of the war for the diarists as subjects.

Similarities

While the diaries and diarists mentioned in the previous section contain a wide range of variety in terms of their composition, soldier occupation, rank, and duration of service, they contain noticeable similarities to each other and to that of Fisher’s diary in terms of the prose they used to record their experiences as well as the broader themes their entries highlight over time. Private Brown notes his movements explicitly and writes down numerous place names.⁹⁹ He also notes the state of the weather, although not as frequently as Fisher (this will be discussed

⁹⁶ Joan W. Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (1991): 779 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1343743>. For a conversation on the relevance of Scott’s points directly on the evidence of soldiers’ testimony see, Leonard V. Smith, “Paul Fussell’s *The Great War and Modern Memory*: Twenty-Five Years Later,” *History and Theory* 40, no. 2 (2001): 249-250 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2678033>.

⁹⁷ Moore, *Writing War*, 12. See also Winter, *Remembering War*, 115; Smith, *The Embattled Self*, 197-198.

⁹⁸ Moore, *Writing War*, 17.

⁹⁹ VAC, CVWM, Private Samuel Henry Brown Digital Collection, Diary.

in the next chapter), and he clearly states his duties and tasks in the diary. For example, on 22 April 1917 Brown notes "... did guard duty from 2 to 4 afternoon."¹⁰⁰ Corporal Kelty, though an officer, also relays similar ordinary themes in his testimony of experience on the Front, recording his movements, billets, events like general inspections, and sports days, or having to move due to shelling. Kelty's entries are actually so similar overall to those found in Fisher's diary that I would not necessarily be able to tell them apart. To give some examples: on 2 August 1916 Kelty writes: "In billet, Farmhouse."¹⁰¹ Or on September 5: "Trenches Festubert. Taking rations to firing line. On sentry Willow Road Corner."¹⁰² Fisher on 22 April 1918 writes: "Moved to Luez. Billeted in a Sugar Refinery & Farm."¹⁰³ Or on 31 December 1916: "Rations moved cook kitchen for feed B. Coy."¹⁰⁴ Shevin-Coetzee and Coetzee note similar occurrences in terms of the themes found within the six diaries they discussed. Within their sample they identify the clear recurring themes of recreation, notation and description of place, and the reporting of the state of the weather.¹⁰⁵ Throughout Fisher's diary there are also clearly distinguishable themes that taken together seem to encompass his overall experience. They relay what can only be described as the everydayness of the war, as will become clear in the next chapter.

¹⁰⁰ VAC, CVWM, Private Samuel Henry Brown Digital Collection, Diary, "22 April 1917."

¹⁰¹ The Great War Archive (hereafter GWA), University of Oxford (hereafter UO), The Diary of Corporal John Henry Kelty, 1916, "2 August 1916" <http://www1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/gwa/document/9570> (accessed 5 January 2022).

¹⁰² GWA, UO, The Diary of Corporal John Henry Kelty, 1916, "5 September 1916."

¹⁰³ Fisher, *Diary*, "22 April 1918."

¹⁰⁴ Fisher, *Diary*, "31 December 1916."

¹⁰⁵ Shevin-Coetzee and Coetzee, *Commitment and Sacrifice*, 7, 12.

CHAPTER TWO: Analysis

Identifying Themes

Given the sparse nature of the diary, Fisher's entries do not raise significant questions of interpretation. They can be investigated on their own terms for distinct and recurring themes. By analyzing the contents of each entry, identifying key words that Fisher used to record aspects of his experience, I have been able to recognize and quantify the following seven clearly recurring themes recorded by Fisher within the diary: the state of the weather (termed 'weather'), his movements (termed 'movements'), his duties and tasks (termed 'work'), the occurrence of violent events, or acts of violence (termed 'violence'), his living quarters, events of entertainment such as parades, shows, sports days, and holidays (termed 'entertainment'), and his rations (termed 'food').¹⁰⁶ The figures below show the frequency with which each theme appears in the diary.¹⁰⁷ Apart from these key themes, Fisher also recorded the names of places (such as towns and regions he visited) 350 times. While this could be seen as a significant category of its own, closer examination of the entries in which these place names are noted suggests that the majority of them refer directly to the already identified themes of movements and work and are therefore thus already accounted for and incorporated under these themes.¹⁰⁸ In the diary, Fisher uses both positive and negative adjectives in relation to entries relating to these subjects with the

¹⁰⁶ In cases where the keywords were not clearly assignable or interpretable as referring to multiple themes, such as the word "fine" used in the diary, which Fisher uses in many occasions to refer to the weather, or in some to the condition of his quarters, I looked their context and similar entries within the diary to confirm the appropriateness of the theme allocation. See Fisher, *Diary*.

¹⁰⁷ Note that there can be multiple themes found within one entry.

¹⁰⁸ See Fisher, *Diary*. For example, the entries pertaining movement are often structured as "Moved [place name]" and therefore the place pertains to the act of movement and is thus already accounted for under this category. The same goes entries pertaining to Fisher's tasks and duties, such as "[place name] rations" or "rations [place name]" or "[place name] rations [place name]." Therefore the notation of place is in large accounted for under these two themes, which is why I have chosen not to give it its own separate category. However, the frequent notation of place is a significant attribute of Fisher's diary and will be further discussed in the current chapter.

most often used adjective being “fine” which occurs 72 times. For Fisher, “fine” is most frequently a comment on the weather, which is unsurprising given that this is his most recorded theme, as the figures below clearly indicate.

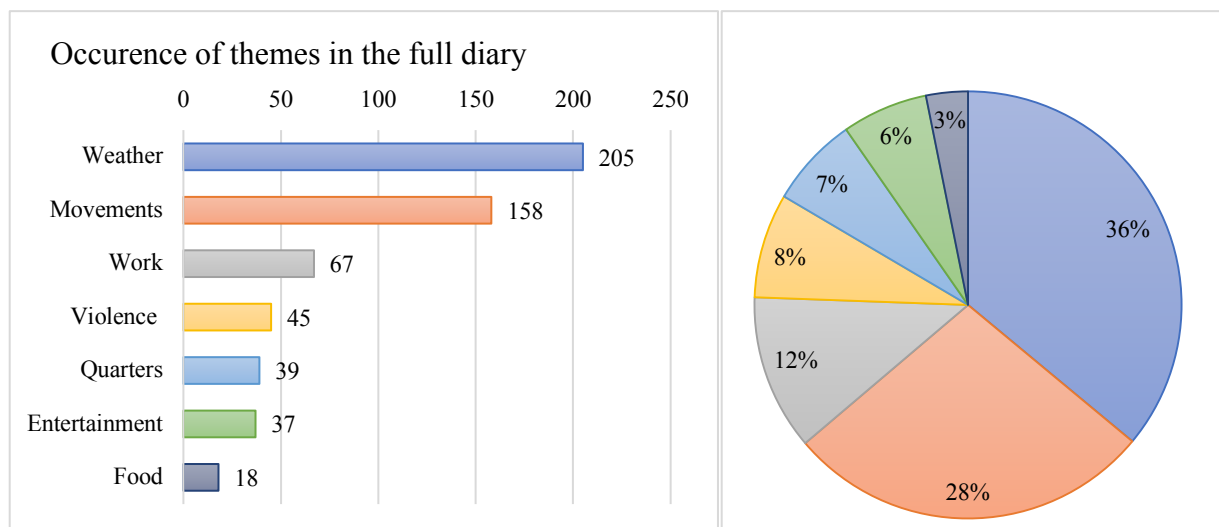


Figure 3: Displaying the occurrence of themes in the full diary in terms of actual occurrence and in relation to one another as percentages.

The mention of movements and relocation follow in frequency of occurrence behind weather, followed by the third most recorded theme of work; the duties and tasks Fisher undertook as a transport driver, such as transporting mail, coal, and rations to his Battalion.

Given that Fisher is more reflexive and has far fewer entries for the pre-December 1916 period, it is unsurprising that the occurrence of themes (in relation to each other) between this period and after he started keeping a daily diary (post-December 1, 1916) differ, as visualized in the two figures below.

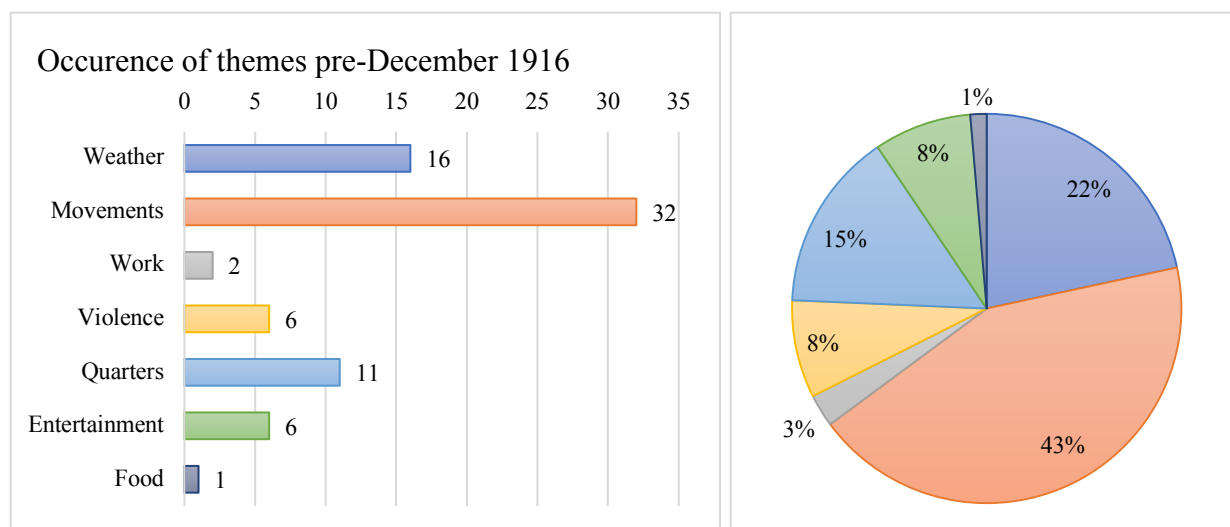


Figure 4: Displaying the occurrence of themes in the pre-December 1916 diary entries in terms of actual occurrence and in relation to one another as percentages.

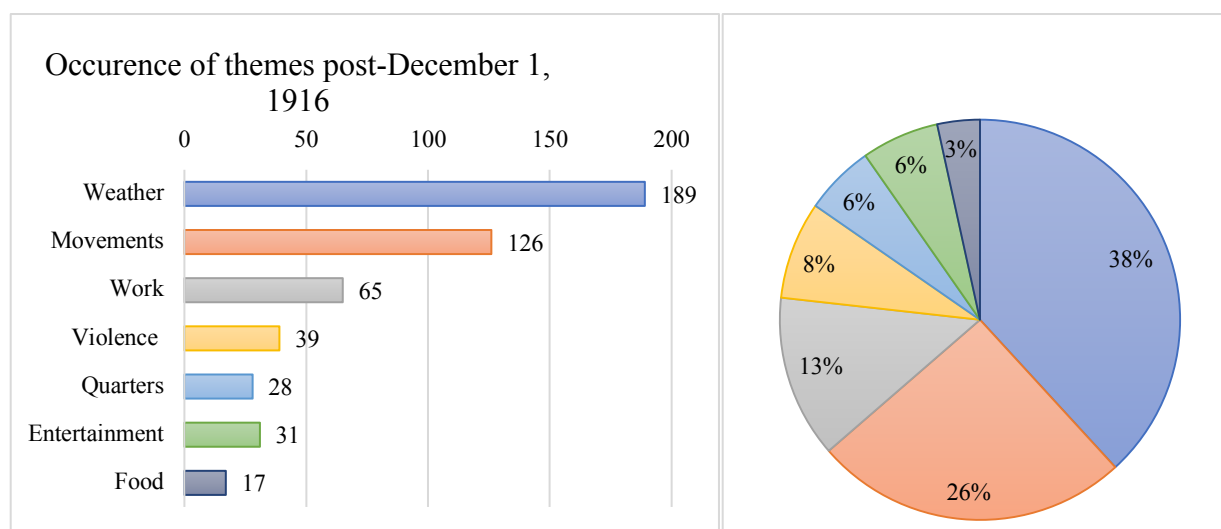


Figure 5: Displaying the occurrence of themes in the post-December 1, 1916 diary entries in terms of actual occurrence and in relation to one another as percentages

As visible in the figures above, the difference between the pre- and post-December 1, 1916 parts of the diary is significant. The first part of the diary sees a clear increase in the prevalence of the themes of movements and quarters paired with a decrease in the prevalence of the themes of work and weather, compared to the occurrence of themes in relation to one another in the post-

December 1, 1916 diary entries. The decrease in references to weather within the first part of the diary can be explained by the fact that Fisher makes fewer specific dated notes on this, instead ascribing general weather conditions for whole months on a number of occasions, such as “rain & mud.”¹⁰⁹ What these differences suggest is in essence a visual representation of how, in hindsight, different aspects of his experience, such as the places he visited and his quarters, took on a bigger descriptive role. This highlights (within the same source) the active role of individuals in the shaping of their narrative of experience. In other words, this reflexive period gives us an idea of what Fisher thought was important to remember. A number of entries within this reflexive period also seem to reflect certain ‘milestones’ Fisher identified himself with during his time on the Front:

- 21 December 1914: “2nd leave in England”¹¹⁰
- 22 April 1915: “Scrap started”¹¹¹
- 14 June 1915: “V. Swanston joined Transport.”¹¹²
- 11 December 1915: “Leave for London ... All my time in the “Smoke” ”¹¹³
- 15 February 1916: “One year in France”¹¹⁴
- 24 April 1916: “1st time Fritz used Minnies”¹¹⁵

These entries also suggest how he processed his past experiences. The entry for 22 April 1915 signifies the start of the Second Battle of Ypres, which would have been Fisher’s first offensive.¹¹⁶ Yet “Scrap started” clearly does not encapsulate this as a first experience for

¹⁰⁹ Fisher, *Diary*, “November 1914,” “January 1915,” “August 1915,” “September 1915,” “November 1915,” “January 1916.”

¹¹⁰ Fisher, *Diary*, “21 December 1914.”

¹¹¹ Fisher, *Diary*, “22 April 1915.”

¹¹² Fisher, *Diary*, “14 June 1915.”

¹¹³ Fisher, *Diary*, “11 December 1915.”

¹¹⁴ Fisher, *Diary*, “15 February 1916.”

¹¹⁵ Fisher, *Diary*, “24 April 1916.”

¹¹⁶ Fisher, *Diary*, “22 April 1915”; Cook, *At the Sharp End*, 109-170; Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force*, 49-92.

Fisher.¹¹⁷ Instead this entry reflects how his individual worldviews and interpretation of the events have changed since this first battle up until December 1916 by which he would have witnessed a total of four major offensives, thus making this relatively mundane description appropriate.¹¹⁸

Weather

Fisher's frequent recording of the weather suggests how central it was to his daily experience. This is consistent with other evidence.¹¹⁹ Soldiers on the Front spent the majority of their time outside, experiencing the elements directly.¹²⁰ Historian Jessica Meyer observes the frequent notation of the weather in soldiers' diaries, highlighting the importance of the weather both in terms of its overall effect on morale and the discomfort (or pleasure in case of good weather) it brought to the experience of those on the Front.¹²¹ Eksteins also notes the importance of the weather on soldiers' morale.¹²² The anecdotes Eksteins cites suggest that bad weather bothered the soldiers more than the shelling, or even the thought of death.¹²³

In the diary of John French, Shevin-Coetzee and Coetzee identify a specific connection between French's frequent notation of the weather and his role as a sapper; suggesting how the weather would have affected French's capability of carrying out his tasks and duties, which

¹¹⁷ Fisher, *Diary*, "22 April 1915."

¹¹⁸ Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force*, 57, 101-102, 147-152, 77.

¹¹⁹ See Jessica Meyer, *Men of War: Masculinity and the First World War in Britain* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 49-52, 72-73; Shevin-Coetzee and Coetzee, *Commitment and Sacrifice*, 7.

¹²⁰ Morton, *When Your Number's Up*, 136; Meyer, *Men of War*, 49; Paddy Griffith, *The Great War on the Western Front: A Short History* (South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword Books Ltd, 2008), 26.

¹²¹ Meyer, *Men of War*, 49-53, 60.

¹²² Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, 104-105, 149.

¹²³ Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, 148-149.

explains why this was a central theme found in French's dairy.¹²⁴ As a transport driver, Fisher had some of the same concerns. Mud would mean a hard time for his horses and limber; getting supplies to the frontlines would be especially challenging. Rain and snow also would be understandably unpleasant when exposed in transit. Weather thus would have had a direct effect on his tasks and duties, and evidence suggesting this connection can be found within the diary: On 30 June 1918 he noted "fine dry weather lot of grip" and on 3 December 1918, "wet roads bad."¹²⁵

Fisher uses a variety of terms to record the state of the weather, as itemized in the table below. I have further classified these as either positive or negative conditions to see how often he reported on either of these types of conditions, as visualized in the figure below.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Shevin-Coetzee and Coetzee, *Commitment and Sacrifice*, 7-8.

¹²⁵ Fisher, *Diary*, "30 June 1918," "3 December 1918."

¹²⁶ Note that I have included the seemingly neutral term of dull as indicating positive conditions here. Fisher uses a total of 259 terms referring to the weather. Note that this is not equal to the count of 205 weather entries in total in the diary because Fisher uses multiple terms within one entry in some instances, such as "rain & wet." thus counting for two terms, but only one weather entry.

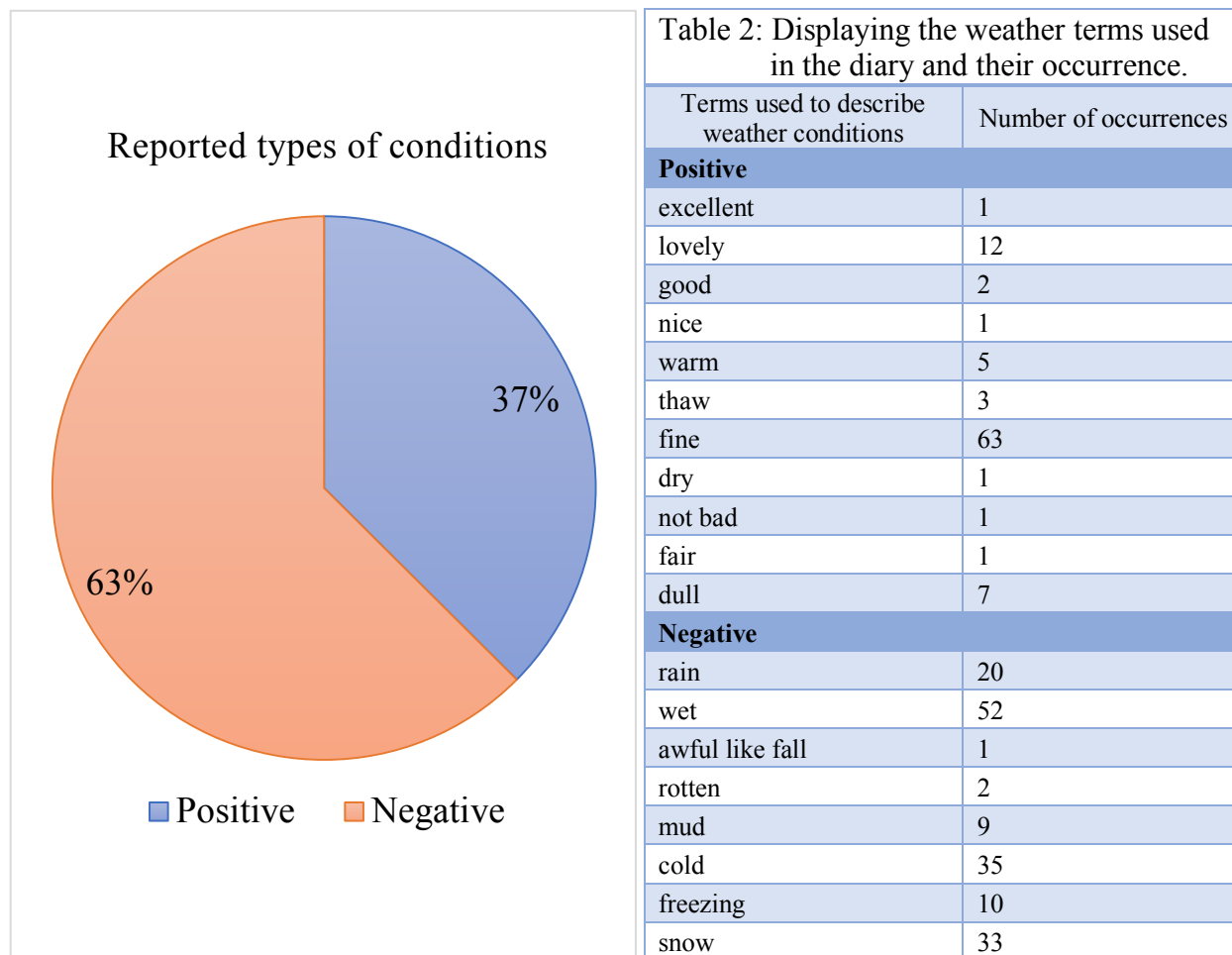


Figure 6: Displaying the prevalence of positive versus negative weather conditions reported in the diary.

In terms of referencing the seasons Fisher only uses the word summer three times after noting warm weather and fall once, as seen in the table.¹²⁷ It is unsurprising given the effect on morale that negative weather conditions would have been reported on more than those he enjoyed.¹²⁸ Fisher's use of negative qualitative adjectives such as "awful" and "rotten" attest to this, further

¹²⁷ For notations of summer see Fisher, *Diary*, "July 1915," "25 September 1917," "3 May 1918." For fall see Fisher, *Diary*, "18 April 1917."

¹²⁸ Fisher's notation of good weather alongside bad weather in the diary is also what Meyer has noted in her examination of other war diaries. See Meyer, *Men of War*, 49, 60.

implying how he felt about these types of conditions and how they affected him. Yet his notation of positive weather conditions, paired with the more frequent use of qualitative adjectives bearing positive implications such as “good,” “lovely,” and even “excellent,” seem to underline the importance of these types of conditions for Fisher and his overall experience.¹²⁹ Also notable is Fisher’s infrequent mention of mud. There is a reason critics of later memoirs and stories of the war called them the “mud and blood” narratives.¹³⁰ Mud serves in them as the signifier of general experience. Yet less than 4% of Fisher’s references to weather comment on mud.¹³¹ The majority of these mentions of mud are found within the pre-December 1916 entries, as generalizing weather conditions for entire months rather than in specific daily entries.¹³² Within the post-December 1, 1916 entries mud is only noted on three times, on 18 and 23 February and 5 November of 1917, after which there is no further mention of this condition.¹³³ In the nine references to mud, seven are paired with the mention of rain.¹³⁴ It might be argued that for Fisher wet conditions implied mud, so that “rain” and “wet” were enough to identify a wide range of poor conditions experienced in the trenches. With wet conditions totaling 27% of entries on weather, it could be assumed that many of these take mud as a given.¹³⁵ This possibly suggests

¹²⁹ Fisher, *Diary*.

¹³⁰ Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, 153.

¹³¹ Fisher mentions mud nine times. With 259 total weather references mud makes up only 3.47%. $(9/259) \times 100\% =$

¹³² See Fisher, *Diary*, “18 February 1917,” “23 February 1917,” “5 November 1917.”

Fisher, *Diary*, “November 1914,” “January 1915,” “August 1915,” “September 1915,” “October and November 1915,” “January 1916.” Fisher gives generalized conditions for the entire month such as for November 1914: “Weather: Rain rain & mud, all the time.” or September 1915: “mud & rain. cold.” or October and November 1915: “two & three feet of mud in places.”

¹³³ Fisher, *Diary*, “18 February 1917,” “23 February 1917,” “5 November 1917.”

¹³⁴ Fisher, *Diary*, “November 1914,” “January 1915,” “August 1915,” “September 1915,” “October and November 1915,” “January 1916,” “5 November 1917.”

¹³⁵ Fisher mentions rain 20 times and wet 52 times. So in total he makes direct mention of wet conditions 72 times in the diary. $(72/259) \times 100\% = 27.8\%$

Fisher's acceptance of these conditions as part of the everyday. In other words, it suggests a shift in Fisher's worldviews with regards to this part of his experience.

Movements and Place

With regard to the description of place, Shevin-Coetzee and Coetzee note that those serving far away from home became in a way a "military tourist," giving descriptions of new and unfamiliar places in their diaries.¹³⁶ Hynes also recognizes the need for the notation of place in his work, making the comparison to soldiers' testimonies being somewhat like "travel writing" given the unfamiliar places within which soldiers found themselves.¹³⁷ Fussell, however, notes the exact opposite for British soldiers, highlighting "the absurdity" noted by officers given the "ridiculous proximity of the trenches to home."¹³⁸ Yet the notion of "travel writing" or "military tourist" seems to be fitting given the positive descriptive adjectives Fisher sometimes uses to describe a place or movement in his diary.

- 26 March 1915: "left for Estaires arr. 11pm Fritz dropped bombs near billet nice town canal runs thro' it weather not bad."¹³⁹
- 13 May 1915: "... Locon nice town billeted one day in orchard (trees in bloom)"¹⁴⁰
- 18 December 1916: "left Petit Servins for rest arrived at Houden about 2 00 nice town"¹⁴¹
- 4 January 1918: "Left Dublin lovely crossing"¹⁴²
- 8 May 1918: "Trevent Lovely scenery"¹⁴³
- 4 September 1918: "Moved Wanquedlon Wanauentin nice place."¹⁴⁴
- 17 January 1919: "Left for London nice trip"¹⁴⁵

¹³⁶ Shevin-Coetzee and Coetzee, *Commitment and Sacrifice*, 7.

¹³⁷ Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale*, 5-6.

¹³⁸ Fussell, *The Great War*, 69-70.

¹³⁹ Fisher, *Diary*, "26 March 1915."

¹⁴⁰ Fisher, *Diary*, "13 May 1915."

¹⁴¹ Fisher, *Diary*, "18 December 1916."

¹⁴² Fisher, *Diary*, "4 January 1918."

¹⁴³ Fisher, *Diary*, "8 May 1918."

¹⁴⁴ Fisher, *Diary*, "4 September 1918."

¹⁴⁵ Fisher, *Diary*, "17 January 1919."

Most notable of such entries, however, would be the one written in the middle of the Battle of Arleux on 28 April 1917:

Batt went over 2nd Bdge 570 pr 8 offs.
Lovely weather great sights on captured ground.
6in gun railway dumps.¹⁴⁶

In a battle which resulted in 1255 Canadian casualties, Fisher's description of the captured ground is thus striking for a different reason.¹⁴⁷ Besides his notation of place as a kind of travel experience, many neutral notations of place appear explicable by Fisher's role within his Battalion as horse transport driver. This ties his experience to the third most mentioned theme; work.

Work

The diary shows frequent reference to his military tasks. The following excerpt from the diary with entries for January and February 1917 illustrates how he recorded this aspect of his experience.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ Fisher, *Diary*, "28 April 1917."

¹⁴⁷ Cook, *Shock Troops*, 159.

¹⁴⁸ Fisher, *Diary*, "27 January 1917" to "23 February 1917."

JAN 1917	FEB 1917
Sat 27 cold in train 13 hrs nearly froze. Arr Bethune 4 am	Sat 10. Cold freezing . coal Bruay rations Bully Grenay
Herain Arr 5. Find Trans 8 12 .	Sun 11. little warmer snow still
Sun 28. Fine billets 4 00 out hse stove good barn rations. Bully	on ground moved cook kitchens
Grenay. snow cold	Mon. 142 cold snowed ordance mail
Mon 29. snow cold picket	mail. picture show.
Tues 30 ditto Batt relieved	Tues 13. Thaw. harness. Can mail
Wed 31 ditto coal.	Wed 14. ditto
Thur 1st ditto water	Thur 15 rations
Fri 2 ditto rations	Fri 16. engineers Bully
Sat 3 ditto water	Sat 17 harness
Sun 4 ditto harness	Sun 18. moved cook kitchens
Mon 5 ditto Batt trenches	water 2 miles mud
Tues 6 ditto rations Bully Grenay ¹⁴⁹	Mon 19 coal water
Wed 7 “ harness	Tues 20 water
Thur 8 “ rations Bully	Wed 21. water
Fri 9 “ harness ¹⁵⁰	Thur 22 coal rations home. 12. midnight
	Fri 23 Batt enter Fosse
	move C. kitchen mud

Figure 7: This is an excerpt for parts of the months of January and February 1917 taken directly from the verbatim transcript found in Appendix A.

Apart from noting that he “nearly froze” when returning from leave because his train was significantly delayed (an event also reported on in his service records), being on picket duty from January 29 to 30, and the overall cold weather conditions during these two months, the rest of the entries pertain predominantly to the moving of supplies. Fisher notes which items he transported and gives a place name, most likely where he collected the supplies. On February 10, it appears

¹⁴⁹ Bully Grenay here refers to a place in northern France now called Bully-Les-Mines, these entries do not refer to the type of ration known as ‘bully beef.’

¹⁵⁰ Harness most likely refers to a horse saddle here, so these entries might suggest that he sat in the harness that day.

he picked up coal from Bruay, as well as rations from Bully Grenay. “Engineers” likely suggests that Fisher helped move supplies relating to the duties of the engineering companies also part of the Canadian Divisions, or directly helped with the engineering duties in some way. Fisher’s detailed notation of place and items relating to his job as part of the Battalion suggests both his continuous occupation with these tasks throughout the war and the value he placed on this part of his experience. Shevin-Coetzee and Coetzee, commenting on the diary of John French, note something similar, arguing that the diary:

illuminates the less dramatic daily rhythms of life on the western front. His entries, inscribed in an elegant copperplate hand, detail his service without melodrama or any effort to exaggerate his own role. As such, they reflect his dedication to duty, his unflinching willingness to fulfill his obligations without dissent or the expectation of special recognition.¹⁵¹

For Fisher, the consistent notation of his daily tasks and objectives within the wider narrative of the war indicates a similar appreciation. The central importance he attributed to his regular tasks is particularly revealed in an entry of 14 July 1917 recording his annoyance with close strafing from the Germans that made his work up the line “no good.”¹⁵²

Overall, the frequency of the mention of many of the identified themes; food, living quarters, the weather, and entertainment have been identified by a number of historians as important aspects of soldiers’ morale on the front.¹⁵³ The state of morale was closely tied to the ups and downs of everyday experience. As Meyer notes, “Fine weather, with its attendant effect on morale, was recorded alongside bad weather, good food and regular mail deliveries were

¹⁵¹ Shevin-Coetzee and Coetzee, *Commitment and Sacrifice*, 19.

¹⁵² Fisher, *Diary*, “14 July 1917.”

¹⁵³ Meyer, *Men of War*, 49-53, 60; Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, 147-149; Morton, *When Your Number's Up*, 138; Griffith, *The Great War*, 26-27. See also John G. Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies, 1914-1918* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), particularly Chapter 6: “Life in the Line”; Alexander Watson, “Mutinies and Military Morale,” In *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War*, ed. by Hew Strachan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

noted and celebrated. Entertainments such as pierrot troupes were appreciated and described, sometimes in great detail.”¹⁵⁴

Violence

While the entire diary encapsulates Fisher’s war experience from enlistment to discharge, it can be argued that as the diary covers around six-and-a-half months before getting to the front in France, as well as around six-and-a-half months after the Armistice, the entries pertaining to acts of violence are likely underrepresented insofar as these were restricted to the period of hostilities. However, even when looking only within the period from 15 February 1915 until 11 November 1918, the prevalence of acts of violence compared to other themes only changes by 2% as visible in the figure below.

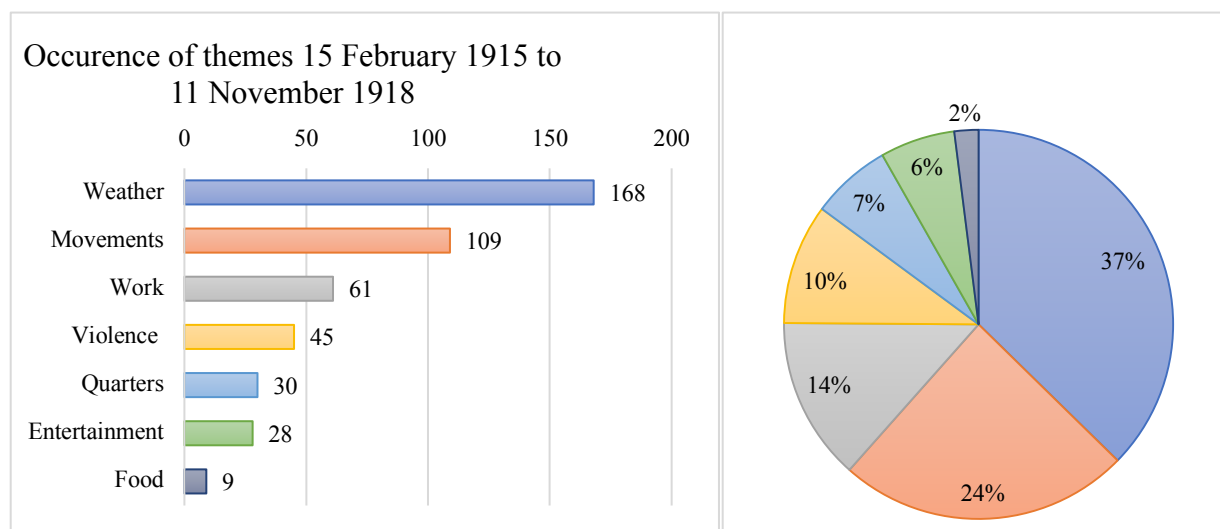


Figure 8: Displaying the occurrence of themes in the diary from 15 February 1915 until the Armistice on 11 November 1918.

¹⁵⁴ Meyer, *Men of War*, 60.

As visible, acts of violence are in fourth place behind that of almost everyday notations of the weather, movements, and work. This suggests that this theme, central to the popular narratives, was not as central to Fisher's experience. Eksteins offers a possible explanation for this, suggesting that "after several weeks of frontline experience there was little that could shock. Men became immunized, rather rapidly, to the brutality and obscenity."¹⁵⁵

Given that Fisher's 'daily' diary did not start until December 1916 it is not possible to see if Fisher actually became 'immunized' to the circumstances he now perceived as everyday. However, a correlation shows in the length of entries and the prevalence of specific themes which suggests that Fisher made a distinction between seemingly everyday acts of violence and those he considered unusual. For instance, violence is not represented in one-word entries, rather only those themes of routine and the everyday. Among the ten longest entries (ranging from 20 to 42 words), however, almost 50% concern violence, surpassing that of the weather (as visible in the figure below).

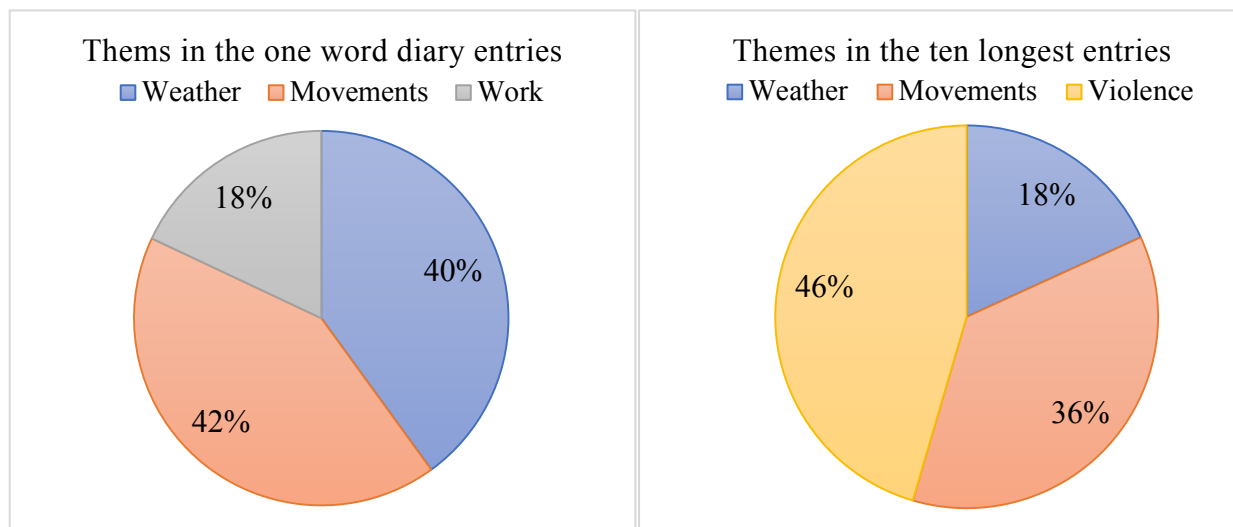


Figure 9: Displaying the prevalence of themes within one-word entries and the ten longest entries found in the diary.

¹⁵⁵ Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, 154.

This seems to suggest that even within the war, which by definition is an act of violence, Fisher might be making a distinction between the acts of violence that were part of the normal, and those acts (or rather episodes) that were not in fact part of his everyday experience of the war.

Violence recorded among the ten longest entries does not include the roughly twenty mentions of shelling in the diary but concerns two aerial battles as well as the two largest offensive actions that the 5th Battalion participated in: the Battle of Vimy Ridge and the Battle of Arleux, both of which took place in April of 1917.¹⁵⁶ For 12 April 1917, in the aftermath of the Battle of Vimy Ridge, Fisher gives the following description:

Thur 12 reserve entered
front line relieved 1st Bde
ground one mass of shell
holes dead ours & Fritz
lying all around [*sic*].¹⁵⁷

These longer entries therefore referred to events beyond the usual for someone who had been on the Front as long as Fisher had. His long descriptions thus highlight that these events stood out to him and might help us understand why battles like these later came to be seen as central parts of the popular narrative and the soldiers experience in published accounts, even though they were seen as an ‘unusual’ occurrence (and thus an ‘unusual’ part of the experience) by Fisher.

Eksteins highlights this by explaining that the critics of the “mud and blood” narrative exclaim that “to concentrate on the horror of Verdun, the Somme, and Ypres, say the critics, is to distort the reality of the war. Even in these sectors, which were not, they claim, the norm, massive artillery bombardments and attacks were rare.”¹⁵⁸ Yet even here, other sources help draw a

¹⁵⁶ Fisher, *Diary*, “24 April 1916,” “12 April 1917,” “28 April 1917,” “27 September 1917.”

See Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force*, 554-555, for Vimy Ridge: 253, for Arleux: 271. See also Cook, *Shock Troops*, for Vimy Ridge: 93-148, for Arleux: 152-159.

¹⁵⁷ Fisher, *Diary*, “12 April 1917.”

¹⁵⁸ Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, 153-155.

contrast. For example the account by Brown, from one of the diaries discussed in the previous chapter, treats these quite differently. His entry for Vimy Ridge reads “we went over the top at the vimmy ridge [*sic*],” not providing any further descriptions or mentions of the battle even though he had only arrived on the Front one month prior (and was thus relatively new to experiencing violence on the Front).¹⁵⁹ After this entry his diary continues simply to fill pages with entries relating to movements and tasks.¹⁶⁰ Eksteins here offers yet again an explanation: “[it] is a matter of definition and semantics. What sort of experience does one classify under “horror” and what constitutes “boredom”? Cannot one man’s horror be another man’s boredom, and vice versa?”¹⁶¹ Fisher’s coverage of violence, and the variation in this with other sources, once again highlights the individual human agency present in the testimonies of the Great War and suggests how Fisher apprehended these types of experiences.

‘Reality’ versus Experience

Besides the clear themes present in the diary, Fisher’s entries and their frequencies also correlate with a number of distinct ‘events’ within his experience that highlight what Fisher deemed important (in terms of what he wanted to remember, and what he saw as important parts of his experience) in a number of ways. The figure below visualizes these correlations by displaying the total frequency of entries per month, the frequency of entries related to violence,

¹⁵⁹ VAC, CVWM, Private Samuel Henry Brown Digital Collection, Diary, “9 April 1917.”

¹⁶⁰ VAC, CVWM, Private Samuel Henry Brown Digital Collection, Diary.

¹⁶¹ Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, 154.

together with the battles the 5th Battalion participated in, as well as periods of absence from the front as recorded in Fisher's official service records.¹⁶²

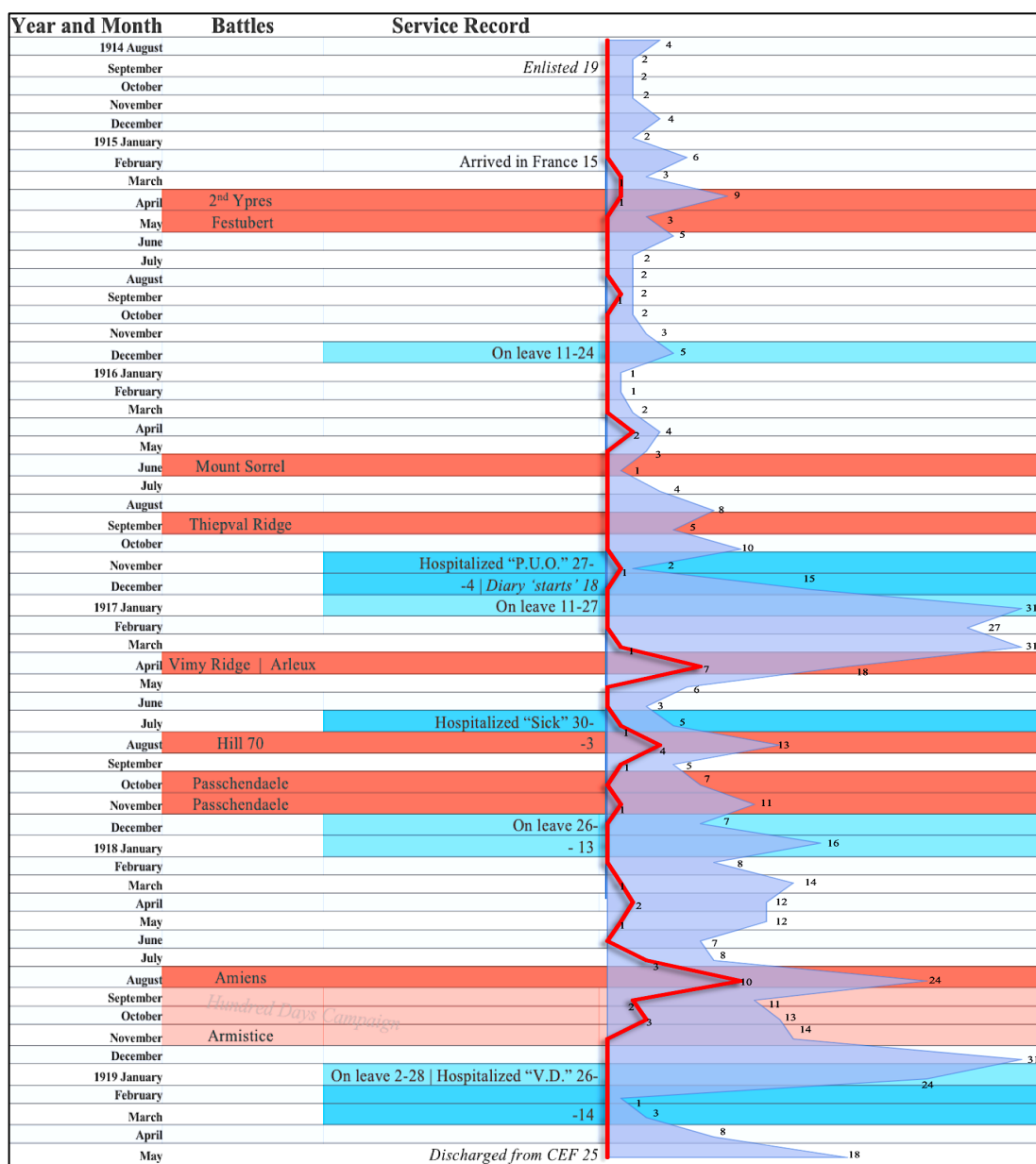


Figure 10: Displaying the total number of diary entries as well as the number of entries pertaining to violence per month, overlaid with the battles the 5th Battalion participated in and Fisher's absences from the Front as found in his personnel files.

¹⁶² Fisher, *Dairy*; Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force*, for Second Ypres: 57, for Festubert: 101-102, for Mount Sorrel: 147-152, for Thiepval Ridge: 177, for Vimy Ridge: 253, for Arleux: 271, for Hill 70: 290-291, for Passchendaele: 325-326, for Amiens: 412; LAC, Military fonds, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 3110 – 35: 391335, Service File, O.E. Fisher, (Regiment no. 12640, CEF, WWI), "Casualty Form," "Medical History Sheet";

This visualization shows an obvious and clear relationship to the recording of episodes of violence in the diary and the occurrence of battles. This relates back to what was discussed in the previous section regarding the more elaborate coverage of battles in the diary, suggesting they were an ‘unusual’ occurrence within Fisher’s overall experience. Besides the general increase in entries after Fisher starts keeping a ‘daily’ diary at the end of 1916, further increases seem to correlate with Fisher’s periods of leave, as can be seen in the months of December 1915, January 1917, January 1918, and January 1919.¹⁶³ Fisher wrote entries for every day during leave, noting the places he visited as well as the specific shows and performances he went to go see and what he thought of them.¹⁶⁴ Overall the entries made during leave are more detailed than the majority of those on the Front, suggesting both more opportunity for Fisher to record, as well as his interest in keeping a more detailed record of these experiences.

Besides this, the figure also suggests that certain aspects of Fisher’s experience seem to have been purposely omitted from the diary, suggesting that he wanted to maintain a distinct memory of the war. As also visible in the figure above, Fisher’s CEF service records indicate that he was admitted to hospital on three occasions.¹⁶⁵ The first hospitalization was from 27 November 1916 until 4 December 1916 and was noted as pyrexia of unknown origin (PUO), which is the description for a fever.¹⁶⁶ Fisher did not report on this hospitalization in his diary;

¹⁶³ LAC, Military fonds, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 3110 – 35: 391335, Service File, O.E. Fisher, (Regiment no. 12640, CEF, WWI), “Casualty Form.”

¹⁶⁴ Fisher *Diary*, “11, 23 December 1915,” “10-27 January 1917,” “26 December 1917- 13 January 1918,” “2-26 January 1919.”

¹⁶⁵ LAC, Military fonds, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 3110 – 35: 391335, Service File, O.E. Fisher, (Regiment no. 12640, CEF, WWI), “Casualty Form,” “Medical History Sheet”.

¹⁶⁶ LAC, Military fonds, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 3110 – 35: 391335, Service File, O.E. Fisher, (Regiment no. 12640, CEF, WWI), “Medical History Sheet”; LAC, Military Abbreviations used in Service Files, “PUO,” <https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/Pages/military-abbreviations.aspx> (accessed 5 February 2022).

the page is left blank between November 9 and December 18.¹⁶⁷ Fisher's second hospitalization occurred from 30 July 1917 until 3 August 1917 and was noted simply as "sick."¹⁶⁸ In this instance Fisher records his admission to the field ambulance in an entry on July 30.¹⁶⁹ The final instance of hospitalization recorded in his service file was from 26 January 1919 until 14 March 1919.¹⁷⁰ The diagnosis in his service file suggest that he contracted a form of venereal disease (VD).¹⁷¹ His diary makes no mention of this event. Entries in the months of February and March are noticeably sparse (they include a note on snow on the ground) and this sparseness can clearly be observed in the figure above.¹⁷² It was not unusual for soldiers in the CEF to contract VD – this was frequent, even 'normal' with an infection rate of nearly one in nine – but it stands out that Fisher did not make any mention of his admission to hospital.¹⁷³ There was significant stigma surrounding the contraction of VD within the CEF.¹⁷⁴ It is no surprise that Fisher would not want it known, but since a diary is by definition a private account it is not immediately clear

¹⁶⁷ Fisher *Diary*, "November 1916," "December 1916."

¹⁶⁸ LAC, Military fonds, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 3110 – 35: 391335, Service File, O.E. Fisher, (Regiment no. 12640, CEF, WWI), "Medical History Sheet."

¹⁶⁹ Fisher *Diary*, "30 July 1917."

¹⁷⁰ LAC, Military fonds, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 3110 – 35: 391335, Service File, O.E. Fisher, (Regiment no. 12640, CEF, WWI), "Medical History Sheet"; Lyndsay Rosenthal, "Venus in the Trenches: The Treatment of Venereal Disease in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919," (PhD dissertation, Wilfrid Laurier University, 2018), 82 <https://scholars.wlu.ca/etd/2107>; Cook, *Shock Troops*, 176. The treatment and recuperation period for venereal disease in the CEF was around one month to six weeks, with soldiers being isolated in specialized hospitals.

¹⁷¹ LAC, Military Abbreviations used in Service Files, "VD," <https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/Pages/military-abbreviations.aspx> (accessed 5 February 2022); LAC, Military Abbreviations used in Service Files, "VDS," <https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/Pages/military-abbreviations.aspx> (accessed 5 February 2022). LAC, Military fonds, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 3110 – 35: 391335, Service File, O.E. Fisher, (Regiment no. 12640, CEF, WWI), "Medical History Sheet." This was possibly syphilis as the medical records contain the abbreviation "V.D.S." which stands for venereal disease syphilis.

¹⁷² Fisher, *Diary*, "January 1919," "March 1919."

¹⁷³ Morton, *When Your Number's Up*, 200; Cook, *Shock Troops*, 176. For an exhaustive investigation into venereal disease specifically within the CEF during the First World War see Rosenthal, "Venus in the Trenches."

¹⁷⁴ Cook, *Shock Troops*, 176; Rosenthal, "Venus in the Trenches" 112-123; Morton, *When Your Number's Up*, 200. This stigma involved segregation and the use of terms such as "venereals" or "moral lepers" to describe the soldiers who had contracted the disease.

why he omitted it. His failure to mention it indicates he may, even for his own remembering, have wanted to disregard and thus forget certain negative and possibly humiliating parts of his experience, thus to remember his time overseas in a distinct way.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has examined the diary of Osmond Edward Fisher against the popular narrative about the war experience that was created in the years after the conflict.

Fisher's diary reveals an experience of war that captures everyday experience. Neither combat nor heroism is central to his record. The longer entries reveal that episodes of violence were perceived as 'unusual'. Their prevalence within later popular narratives does not accurately capture Fisher's life at war. For Fisher, the important aspects of life on the Western Front were the weather, movements and place, particularly as related to his duties as a transport driver within the battalion. The elements that mattered were tied to everydayness.

Fisher's retrospective recording of the first two years of the war reveals that he did identify a number of milestones he saw as important. This part of the diary gives some indication of how his perspective might have changed by making visible his agency in reconstructing experience. The same is indicated by his suppression or exclusion of certain incidents, such as his hospitalization for VD, which speaks to both his sense of meaning and remembrance and the stigma surrounding VD in the CEF.

Overall, the analysis suggests that even within diary accounts of the war, arguably the most realistic first-hand record of a soldier's experience, authorial subjectivity and framing are very much at work. This in turn raises questions about the authority of testimony, what it can tell us about the Great War and how it relates to other kinds of evidence, even as it confirms the role of the individual historical actor in shaping the memory of their experience. Awareness of this role is crucial for assessing the diary on its own terms and for how it can serve historical understanding in light of subsequent meanings attributed to the war.

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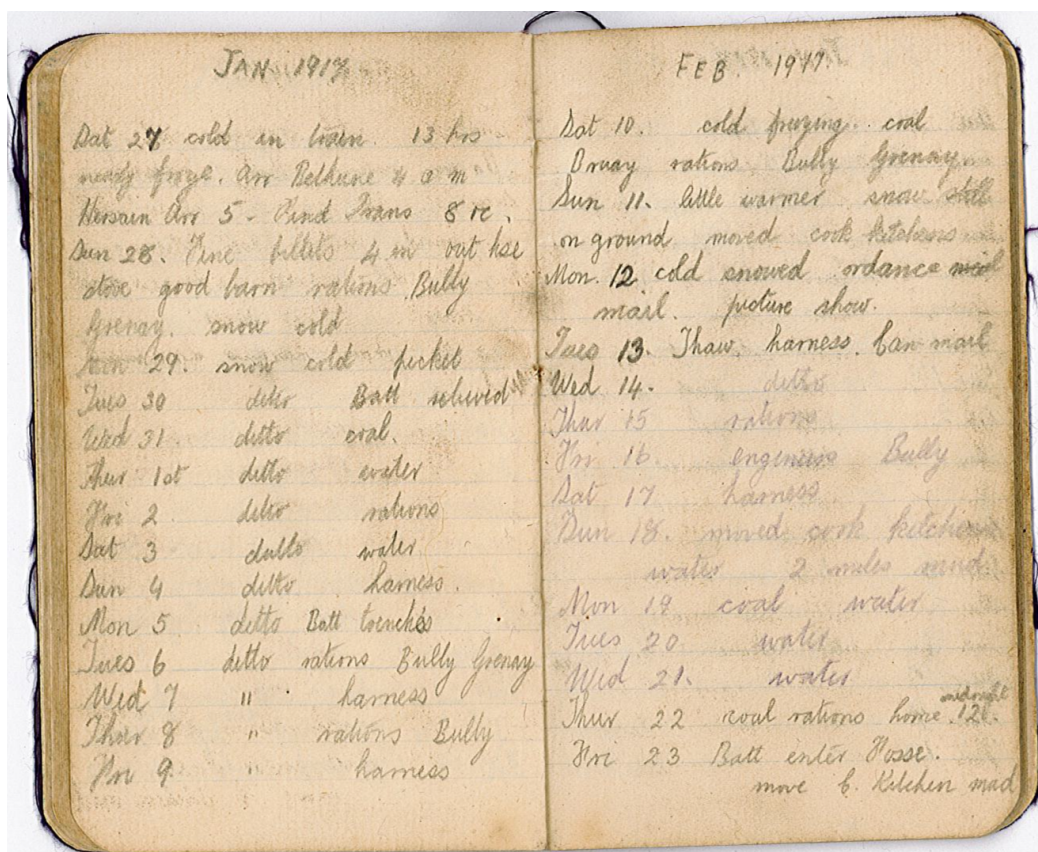
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APPENDIX A

I hope to eventually be able to include a complete version and the verbatim transcription of the diary with this thesis, however, my final version of the transcription requires review and a decision has yet to be made on providing it here in regards to its potential later use for my graduate studies. For now, I have provided here the image of the two diary pages that go with the verbatim transcription used in Figure 7 of this paper to serve as an example of what the diary and its transcription look like. I hope that this provides an adequate visual reference of the diary and its contents for the time being.



JAN 1917	FEB 1917
Sat 27 cold in train 13 hrs nearly froze. Arr Bethune 4 am	Sat 10. Cold freezing . coal Bruay rations Bully Grenay
Herain Arr 5. Find Trans 8 12 .	Sun 11. little warmer snow still on ground moved cook kitchens
Sun 28. Fine billets 4 00 out hse stove good barn rations. Bully Grenay. snow cold	Mon. 12 cold snowed ordance mail mail. picture show.
Mon 29. snow cold picket	Tues 13. Thaw. harness. Can mail
Tues 30 ditto Batt relieved	Wed 14. ditto
Wed 31 ditto coal.	Thur 15 rations
Thur 1st ditto water	Fri 16. engineers Bully
Fri 2 ditto rations	Sat 17 harness
Sat 3 ditto water	Sun 18. moved cook kitchens water 2 miles mud
Sun 4 ditto harness ¹⁷⁵	Mon 19 coal water
Mon 5 ditto Batt trenches	Tues 20 water
Tues 6 ditto rations Bully Grenay ¹⁷⁶	Wed 21. water
Wed 7 " harness	Thur 22 coal rations home. 12. ^{midnight}
Thur 8 " rations Bully	Fri 23 Batt enter Fosse move C. kitchen mud
Fri 9 " harness	

¹⁷⁵ Harness likely refers to a horse saddle here, so these entries might suggest that he sat in the harness that day.

¹⁷⁶ Bully Grenay here refers to a place in northern France now called Bully-Les-Mines, these entries do not refer to the type of ration known as 'bully beef.'