



'Here is the secret. He is - "The Growler"': a Northumberland Fusiliers Trench Newspaper

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Between January 1915 and July 1916 ten issues of a trench newspaper called *The Growler* circulated, initially amidst some mystery, through the ranks of the Sixteenth Service Battalion, Northumberland Fusiliers.

The anonymously written first issue was 'sprung' upon them, according to its editors, 'in the dead of night.?'

It set out the paper's parameters 'Camp concerns, curious customs, commonplace conversations, cookhouse complaints [?], contemptuous collared civilians, comical complications considered caustically.?'

The creators declared its unofficial status, boasting that 'We merely deal with rumours, garbled versions, and perverted truth.' They added that all readers should 'don good-humoured spectacles,' and remember that 'our enemies are the Germans, and not our fellow soldiers.?'

The enigma of who was behind *The Growler* grew in the second issue. The editor asked to 'whisper something in a confidential undertone.' 'Wild conjectures,' he claimed, had been made as to the identity of 'The Editor.' Here is the secret. He is 'The Growler.??'

From mid-way through the battalion's training to mid-way through the war, this anonymous editor regaled his fellow servicemen with humorous gossip, complaints, and satire all relating to their lives in the military.

Like its now famous counterpart *The Wipers Times*, the self-styled 'organ' of the Northumberland Fusiliers was primarily a space for comedic representations of military service.

Much of the comedy was to do with portraying the strangeness of war experience. The battalion was formed in response to the outbreak of the war, and for many of the volunteers military life would have been completely unfamiliar. The circulation of exaggerated rumour and bizarre anecdotes with large amounts of poetic licence were a good way of reflecting upon the seeming oddness of the men's circumstances.

Doses of such humorous content appeared at roughly monthly intervals. There was, though, a gap between the fourth and fifth issues (released in April and June 1915). The editor decided to cease production in April 1915, claiming to be climbing down from his 'throne hugging a heavy cash-box' and wishing to 'retire before the signs of old age become visible to numerous '?' friends.?'

Equally abruptly, though, he was to reintroduce his paper only two months later. 'We've come back as bold as

brass and you can do what you like about it.' We must, he declared, 'rest on a par with stage favourites who make numerous farewell appearances.?

It seemed that no one was safe from the newspaper's growls. Highlights include the short play, 'A Signal Success' 'A Comedy of Flagging Interest.' It was based on an incident in which one of the battalion's officers mistook a shirt being put out to dry for a signal during a training exercise:

OFFICER ' Here you signallers! What is that man with the flag saying to us?

SIGNALLER ' It's a white shirt fling from a clothes line, Sir.

Favourite targets included those soldiers who, on gaining rank, also gained too much self-importance for the editor's liking. One sketch entitled 'Circumstances Alter ' Privates' told the tale of a private who 'fervently swore that he scorned stripes, the hateful emblem of tyrannical authority,' but who then gained promotion along with 'the air and authority of an emperor.?

The identity of the editor had by this point become known within the battalion ' part of the joke of many trench newspapers being that supposedly anonymous contributors were in fact identifiable to their friends.

His name was Corporal Ben Carr and he was from Newcastle. An actor in civilian life, he seems to have taken quite a lively role in the 'extra-curricular' life of his battalion. He organised a theatrical performance for the battalion, for instance, that took place in Pierregot near Amiens.

Before his company led an attack at the Battle of Thiepval on 1 July 1916, he handed a Major A. W. Little a poem entitled 'Here's to Tomorrow?', promising to produce a written copy of the show. It concluded:

??Oh! to-morrow never comes, ' I've heard some people say,

With wisdom surely irritating beyond measure.

But I swear that when the present future is to-day,

If fate so wills, I gladly will disgorge the promised treasure.'

This was to be his last literary contribution to battalion life, however. He was killed in the course of the attack, and is commemorated at the Thiepval Memorial.

His obituarist makes much of *The Growler's* success, and adds a poignant suggestion about the type of man he was.

?He had a fund of humour and a delicate literary touch. One of the most successful Battalion periodicals was The Growler, of which he was the editor, and to which he was the chief contributor. Congratulations on the ability of its issues were received from some of the foremost journalists. It will be pathetic to turn to its pages and to reflect that the man who did so much to entertain his comrades and to keep them in good spirits is no longer with them. A loss of this character brings home to us the unspeakable sadness of war.?

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