

Precious, unseen letters to 'Dear Old Dad' capture WWI experience for children

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I have started a washer for you and I hope it will be all right and will be nice and soft on your face, wat I yous to kiss at night time, Frank Burrowes, 6.

The State Library of NSW's latest exhibition offers a rare, intimate view into the lives of children whose fathers served in the First World War, opening **TOMORROW [Saturday 16 March]**.

According to State Library curator Elise Edmonds: "Rarely is the war experience told through the eyes or, in this case, the words of children. Their heart-felt letters to their fathers, filled with the simple everydayness of their lives, will have many reaching for the tissues!"

Quick March: the children of World War I gives a voice to those left to 'keep the home fires burning', expressed through a selection of children's letters, drawings and homemade cards, as well as photographs, art, books, badges and an original 1919 peace flag – many on public display for the first time.

The exhibition centres around the Burrowes family from Rooty Hill in Sydney's west. Arthur John (Bill) Burrowes, a professional soldier initially based at the Liverpool military training camp, served in the trenches of France where he was wounded in mid-1918.

"His children Ruth, 8, and Frank, 6, sent him sweet, funny letters where they told him all the news from home, drew lots of pictures and shared jokes together," said Elise. "These poignant letters were often addressed to 'Dear Old Dad' or 'Dear Old Daddy', and were filled with hugs and kisses."

"The letters were cherished so much that Bill kept them with him, even in the trenches."

Exhibition visitors can experience what home life was like for children during the war like Ruth and Frank. Step inside a WWI era living room and enjoy a beautiful soundscape imagining their day-to-day life, created by scriptwriter Hilary Bell and performed by actors from the Australian Theatre for Young People (ATYP).

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Younger visitors can play 'Catch the Kaiser' at the dining table and dress up in nurses' and soldiers' uniforms, just like Ruth and Frank would have done.

Quick March also highlights how children contributed to the war effort (by knitting and fundraising), the books they were reading at school (often about bravery and sacrifice) and the peace marches of 1919.

"The exhibition is timely as this year (on 28 June) marks the 100th anniversary of the Treaty of Versailles which officially brought an end to World War I," said Elise.

"The subsequent peace celebrations were short-lived for the children of WWI with many serving in the Second World War, including Ruth and Frank who enlisted in June 1940 within two days of each other."

Frank served in the Middle East, New Guinea and Borneo. He was wounded at the battle of Bardia (North Africa), the first battle Australians fought in during WW2. His helmet, which saved his life, was shot to pieces and he ended up at the Second Australian General Hospital in the Middle East where Ruth was working as a nurse. In a letter to their mother Annie, dated, 19th January 1941, he wrote:

Apparently I'd got a pretty near direct hit on the head as there were little bits of my tin hat lying all round me. Also I'd got something or other through my buttocks which made me rather awkward.

Visitors can listen to recordings of selected letters featured in the exhibition, voiced by ATYP actors.

Quick March: the children of World War I is a free exhibition at the State Library of NSW from 16 March to 6 October 2019. www.sl.nsw.gov.au/galleries

Elise Edmonds is available for interviews.

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Extracts from letters:

Ruth Burrowes, 8, to her father, 19 July 1918:

Dear Old Jam-Tin ... We are sitting in front of the fire - we have had it for two nights and mum kept two bricks for she wanted to keep the bed warm. So don't you want wish you where wore at home so's to keep the bed warm for Mother?

Frank Burrowes, 6, to his father, 21st May 1918:

I am getting on all right but I am not at school ... I have chopped down two trees this morning. and mum and anna are bathing pupy and they have caught lots of flees off him and he is a sleep all the time and he is real funny you would like to see him you would think he was real funny and I wish you could see him.

Frank Burrowes, 6, to his father, 11 November 1918

*Dear old Daddy,
At Christmas I want Santa Claws to push you down the Chimney. We went to Mrs Woolnow for tea and we had kidnese and fish for tea dont you wish you could have some and Mrs Woolnow gave us an Apple and an Orange each and she said we orta go down every one night a week for tea. I dont think we could do you. Ruth dus not want to write to you she has gone to bed. I hope your wound will get better...*

Frank Burrowes, 27, to his mother, Sunday 19th January 1941:

My mates went off and got stretcher-bearers for me and I put in three and a half days getting back here to hospital although I was operated on somewhere on the way in and had eighteen stitches put into my behind and numerous bits of tin hat dug out of my skull and nobody knows if I've had any stitches in my head or not. However I certainly had my share of luck as by all the rules I should have been finished after the belt on the head I got and whatever hit me behind just missed my spine, and I'll be pretty well as good as new in a few weeks. I was lucky to strike Ruth here, wasn't I? and I get looked after real well, getting all sorts of things from her and her friends who all seem to be very nice! When I first arrived here I was slightly under the influence of cocaine and when I was told my sister was here, argued that she wasn't and didn't really believe she was until I'd seen her.

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