

The following text is a transcript of a student reading at the University of Manchester's WWI Centenary Event, 25 November 2014. Each reading consists of a brief introduction, followed by correspondence between Professor Tout and students who were serving in WWI.

Student 1: Professor Thomas Frederick Tout (1855 – 1929) was an internationally renowned medievalist and the central force behind the creation of the Manchester History School. Tout's archive, held at the John Rylands Library, contains numerous letters written to Tout by current and former students who were serving in the armed forces during the First World War. These letters provide vivid descriptions of life on the Front line, including fears of machine gun and gas attacks, experiences of army life, sacrifice and morale, and thoughts on the direction of the war.

Letter from M V Gregory to Thomas Tout

16 November 1916

Dear Professor Tout,

My first impressions of a strafe are very vivid, especially of the bombardment which Fritz gave us when he discovered he was gassed. Casualties though were small: of about 250 men in our company, two were killed by a dug-out being blown in, two wounded and about three gassed. I escaped scott free, in spite of my fervent hopes for a Blighty touch to land me home for Christmas...I have quite settled down to the life out here. As a rule you are kept miles from anywhere and you gradually sink into a state of calm. Nothing seems to matter. The infantry sum the feeling up in a song they have, 'Never Mind'. Whatever happens, never mind. You seem to lose interest in everything except your immediate surroundings...We have many amusing little experiences though life in the main is hardly a picture. The general attitude amongst the men out here is to make the best of a bad job. Everyone talks of 'apres la guerre', as if the end was drawing near if not actually in sight...I often think of Manchester and the happy times the first years had last year, thanks in many instances to the efforts of yourself and Mrs. Tout....News sometimes percolates through but of the doings of the History School I can find out very little.

M V Gregory survived the war

The next letter was written to Tout by Robert Harold Bedford.

5 October 1915

Dear Professor Tout,

Thank you for your letter. I was delighted to receive it and very proud, for I think there must be very few people who can boast at having received such a long letter from so busy a man as yourself. I was able to read it in peace for the Turk has fired his daily allowance of his big gun ammunition. I will not bore you with the trivial details of trench life, for the English papers that we receive here are full of them, and no doubt you are all bored to tears of stories of narrow escapes and Tommy Atkins' ingenious devices and improvisations in his rabbit warrens.

The saddest think I had to do is to write to the relatives of fallen soldiers to reply to terribly pathetic letters that send to ask of news of how their laddies died and where they are buried. Living as we do in the atmosphere of callousness or rather of dull indifference, it is often difficult to write to these bereaved ones with true feeling.

The smells in these trenches are truly appalling and the spectacle of lines of unburied corpses in front – many of them one's own chums – does not add any enjoyment to the condition of things.

Captain Robert Harold Bedford of the Manchester Regiment, 6th Battalion, died 25 March 1918

END