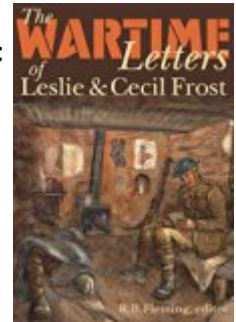


**R. B. Fleming, ed..** *The Wartime Letters of Leslie and Cecil Frost, 1915-1919*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 2007. ix + 420 pp. \$38.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-55458-000-2.



**Reviewed by** Dorotea Gucciardo

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R. B. Fleming has brought together a fascinating collection of letters in this latest contribution to the history of the First World War. The writings of brothers Leslie and Cecil Frost to their parents not only illustrate life as Canadian soldiers stationed overseas, but also provide insight into the formative years of two young men who eventually helped to shape the political culture of Ontario. Born into a tight-knit, politically conscious family, the Frost brothers were taught civic pride at a very young age. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that both Leslie and Cecil answered the call to arms, with Leslie enlisting in the 157th Battalion Simcoe Foresters in 1915 and Cecil in 1916. Fleming divides their letters chronologically, from training to demobilization, and supplies diagrams, pictures, and explanatory notes to help contextualize specific references. Some of the notes were excerpts from Leslie's review of the letters in 1971, the same year he donated the correspondence to Trent University. Fleming also includes three appendices, which detail unit sizes and designations, provincial and federal electoral ridings, and a brief biography for each of the soldiers

mentioned in the letters along with a commentary.

The volume opens with a foreword by Thomas H. B. Symons, the founding president of Trent University and close friend of Leslie. Fleming also includes a memorandum written by Leslie in 1972, which provides a brief history of his life as an active soldier. Fleming writes a detailed introduction about the family lives of Leslie and Cecil, and analyzes how their wartime experiences may have shaped their lives as postwar politicians, as Leslie was the premier of Ontario from 1949 to 1961 and Cecil was the mayor of Lindsay, Ontario, in 1936. Chapters 1 through 3 consist of letters posted by the brothers while training in Canada, and then eventually in England. Much like many soldiers stationed overseas, Leslie encouraged his parents to be strong in their sons' absence: "I know that it is hard for you to have us away but only hold your heads higher. Someday the war will be over and those who did not go and parents who did not let their sons go will not be able to look you in the face" (p. 95).

Chapters 4 and 5 are characterized by the respective arrival of Leslie and Cecil to France. In addition to detailing life overseas, the Frost boys also engaged their parents in discussions of Canadian politics. By 1917, the conscription debate was raging in the federal arena, and neither Leslie nor Cecil was shy in declaring his opinion. On June 4, Leslie wrote to his parents: "I admire Laurier as a statesman but I do not believe in pampering a French Canadian minority while the Empire trembles in the balance.... Conscription is the only way to re-enforce our men at the front and it should be reinforced regardless of politics" (p. 169). Chapters 6 and 7 consist of letters Leslie and Cecil sent to their parents after they each sustained wounds that were not life threatening. In March 1918, Leslie was wounded by a bullet to the chest, and six months later, Cecil was hit with a bullet to the head. Despite their injuries, the brothers continued to send letters home to their parents, assuring them of their good health and high spirits. While Leslie stayed in a hospital to recuperate, Cecil returned to the front.

The eighth and final chapter contains letters from Cecil from Belgium after armistice was declared in November 1918. He put to paper the raw emotion experienced that day: "The people would rush out and crowd around your horse--shout, yell, and embrace a fellow something horrible.... Every man had a grin from ear to ear on his face. Nobody yelled or showed uncontrollable enthusiasm--everybody just grinned and I think the cause was, that the men couldn't find words to express themselves.... They simply grinned" (p. 321). The keen observations of the Frost boys makes it easy at times for the reader to forget that these were two very young men far away from home for the first time. The letters remind us that thousands of young Canadian soldiers grew up amid bullets and billets during the "war to end all wars." In bringing together this collection into a well-structured and user-friendly volume, Fleming has helped to liberate some of these forgotten voices,

and to provide new insights into the Canadian experience of the First World War.

There has been a resurgence of interest in the Great War in the past few years, and with the one hundredth anniversary of the armistice on the horizon, one can only expect that this fascination will continue to grow. It is difficult to find fault in *The Wartime Letters of Leslie and Cecil Frost*. The Frost brothers commented on all the major events occurring in Canada and abroad during the early twentieth century: local and national politics, the conscription debate, the growing fear of influenza, popular culture, and life on the home front. By providing an abundance of context for the correspondence of these two boys from small-town Ontario, Fleming has produced a volume that will be of great benefit to professors, students, and anyone with a general interest in the First World War.

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