

THE SPENDER
CORRESPONDENCE

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WORLD WAR I AND THE
QUESTION OF ULSTER

*The correspondence of Lilian
and Wilfrid Spender*

EDITED BY
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IRISH MANUSCRIPTS COMMISSION

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INTRODUCTION

The British declaration of war in August 1914 must have sent a tremor of uncertainty and apprehension through the populations of both Britain and Ireland. The last major conflict on European soil in which Britain played a principal part had been the Battle of Waterloo almost a hundred years before and although there had been ominous signs of tension between Germany and the European powers over Germany's annexation of the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine which still rankled in France, over Britain and France's desire to thwart Germany's claim for a port on the Atlantic coast of Morocco and the dangers inherent in the arms race, these did not appear to impinge much on the population as a whole. Wilfrid Bliss Spender was an exception. As a former professional soldier and at one time the youngest staff officer in the British Army, he had been writing articles on defence matters for military journals and newspapers since the turn of the century. His wife, Lilian, however, was probably less aware of the seriousness of these international developments and that they foreshadowed her separation from Wilfrid for more years than a newly married couple could reasonably have expected. The decision of the British government to declare war on Germany set in motion a sequence of events that altered irrevocably the course of millions of lives. The changes were quickly to have their effect on individuals as call up papers arrived and training for armed conflict began in earnest.

When Wilfrid and the 36th (Ulster) Division embarked for France in October 1915 letters became a vital lifeline connecting husband and wife, a way of bridging the distance between London where Lilian was then living and the Western Front on which Wilfrid was serving. The decision to write to each other on a daily basis was not taken in advance but happened in the first few days after Wilfrid's departure¹ with the realisation that this was a practical — and indeed the only — way of keeping in touch and of sustaining their marriage. Over the course of the next three and a half years these letters give an extraordinary and detailed account of the actions in which Wilfrid's division took part; they discuss political developments with particular reference to Ireland and its preoccupation with Home Rule; and portray Lilian's work with a war charity; family matters and the impact of war on a husband-wife relationship. This collection of letters is exceptional not only for the significant events that have been recorded but for the fact that the contributions of both correspondents have been preserved and both with equal, though often very different, style and fluency.

In September 1913 the Spenders settled in Belfast some ten days after their wedding and quickly immersed themselves in Ulster Unionist politics and the activities of the Ulster Volunteer Force, the UVF. The UVF was a destabilising force in Irish

¹ See document 4.

politics that in 1913 threatened a local armed insurrection that had the potential to engulf the whole island. Home Rule had again become an issue and a Third Home Rule Bill was making tortuous progress through the House of Commons in London. Unlike the first two Home Rule Bills its chances of successfully overcoming all parliamentary opposition were greater because under the terms of the Parliament Act (1911) the Bill would pass into law automatically with or without the approval of the House of Lords. That point was not lost on Conservative politicians nor, more particularly, on the Ulster Unionists, for it provided a spur to recruitment to the UVF and an incentive for a comprehensive review of its organisation. As an ex-army officer, Wilfrid was an obvious choice to add professionalism to this local militia, especially as he arrived in Ulster with the endorsement of Sir Edward Carson, leader of the Ulster Unionist Party. The appeal of Unionist politics for Wilfrid stemmed from strategic concerns. When serving on a sub-committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence he became conscious of the importance of Ireland in the defence of the British Isles and aware of the necessity of stationing British regular divisions there in the event of war. He believed that the granting of a measure of Home Rule to this small island would imperil Britain's security and jeopardize the integrity of the British Empire as a whole.

Permission to retire from the British army had been obtained only after months of acrimony and agitation. Wilfrid's army superiors insisted that he should resign rather than retire, but Wilfrid maintained that to resign would imply a slur on his honour and he resisted all attempts to persuade or pressure him to do so. His attitude was described as 'eccentric' by Sir John French, then Chief of the Imperial General Staff, who recommended in August 1912 that Wilfrid be cashiered.² But Spender, then a thirty-six year old captain based in the foothills of the Indian sub-continent, pursued his quest with dogged determination from his Commanding Officer to the Commander-in-Chief in India; and from the Commander-in-Chief to the Secretary of State for War in London, J.E.B. Seely, and from the Secretary of State to the sovereign, King George V himself. It was at this stage that the War Office capitulated. Wilfrid's terms were met in full. In the process, however, he had become a marked man, a byword for defiance and trouble and these perceived attributes, so Wilfrid believed, were to blight his later army career.

Wilfrid was a complex man who adopted causes and carried them to lengths, often detrimental to his own advancement. There is evidence to suggest that a year or so earlier, he challenged ammunition figures produced by the Master-General of the Ordnance and created such a stir that his army chiefs sent him to India, forcing Wilfrid to abandon a possible career in politics. With some of his immediate army commanders Wilfrid enjoyed excellent relations and was three times recommended for promotion to Brigadier General, but with others, principally Major General Oliver Nugent commanding the 36th (Ulster) Division and one of his Corps Commanders,

² Sir John French, *Position of the army with regard to the situation in Ulster* (Cabinet Papers, 1913), Mottistone Papers, Nuffield College, Oxford, Box no. 22, pp 156–161/1.

Major General Sir Henry de Beauvoir de Lisle, relations were anything but cordial. Wilfrid blamed de Lisle for blocking all his chances of further promotion. Wilfrid's espousal of the case of one of his generals, whom he felt had been badly treated, left him feeling despondent and impotent. Writing to Lilian, he commented:

I know from the past that it is not easy to make the rough places plain especially when one is dealing with exalted heights. Although I have won respect by the line taken, let there be no doubts as to the personal results. One cannot go in for this form of rough planning [sic] without barking one's hands.³

Wilfrid took pride in the personal qualities he brought to his position as a staff officer but his reserved personality prevented him from displaying his capabilities to best advantage. At the same time he detested 'lime lighters', 'place hunters' and 'thrusters', and this underlying paradox lay deep within his personality. Similarly with the honours system: Wilfrid claimed to have a distaste for decorations, dismissing them as 'faldals',⁴ but at the same time he undervalued any decoration awarded to him, always preferring a higher category. It was an inconsistency that eventually Lilian felt obliged to point out:

Of course, old thing, I won't put DSO any more if you really object, but it is much more noticeable *not* to do so, once people know you have got it. I think, old thing, you misunderstand the attitude of those who congratulate you. The ones who know you are strongly of [the] opinion that it is only a fraction of what you have earned, and *therefore* they are glad to see you getting at least that fraction — as I am. Surely it would be illogical of me to feel vexed — as I do — that you did not get the DSO and several other letters long ago; and yet to feel annoyed when at last you do get *one* of the things? Don't you see my point?⁵

Whereas Wilfrid's family background was in journalism — his father, Edward Spender co-founded Plymouth's first daily newspaper, the *Western Morning News* — on Lilian's side, the Dean family's business roots lay in commerce. Lilian's grandfather was described as a bristle merchant and her father, following in his father's footsteps, was an importer of furs and goods from Russia. Lilian was brought up in the London suburb of Wimbledon. Like other girls of her class, she did not attend school but received a good education with her four sisters at home at the hands of governesses. When she was seventeen, her father moved the family to the Paddington area of London, and then to Craven Hill Gardens on the north side of Hyde Park. She may already have met Wilfrid by then, for both families were living in the same area of London and Wilfrid has written that the two had known each other since childhood.

³ See document 842.

⁴ See document 208.

⁵ See document 1014.

Certainly Lilian and her family were present at the wedding of Wilfrid's sister, Mabel, to the Reverend Walter Dingwall in January 1899 where she met many 'old or mutual friends',⁶ an indication that both families were on cordial terms by the turn of the century.

In 1909 Lilian became engaged to the son of a County Tipperary landowner and in order to equip herself for life as a farmer's wife, she enrolled at the British Dairy Institute, now part of Reading University. There she obtained diplomas in butter- and cheese-making, the only female in her family to obtain professional qualifications and this at a time when women were expected to remain within the parental home until a suitor offered her marriage, a change of scene and a different lifestyle. When she broke off the engagement, again an unusual occurrence, Lilian decided to follow her sister, Ivy, to Canada. She crossed the Atlantic on her own only ten days after the sinking of the *Titanic* and spent a year as a bacteriological assistant before returning to England on holiday in May 1913. Her trip home chanced to coincide with Wilfrid's return from India, in London to pursue his case at the War Office. Wilfrid and Lilian became engaged in June and were married some three months later.

Lilian had shown herself to be a woman of resolution and fortitude. The personal attributes she brought to the marriage were those expected in an upper middle class woman: she was intensely loyal to her husband and supported him in his triumphs and defeats, inevitable in a man who tended to involve himself in crusades. Lilian called them Wilfrid's 'enthusiasms'.⁷ In the early years of the twentieth century, when women were denied direct influence in the running of the country, many excelled at exerting indirect influence through discreet persuasion or quiet manipulation. Such techniques were resorted to when they wished to secure a particular post for their own candidate or wished to impress on husband or lover their opinion of a prominent person. Above all, women saw it as a primary responsibility to further their husband's career by every means in their power. This last avenue became available when Lilian accepted a post as honorary secretary to Lady Carson's Ulster Division Comforts Fund and thus came into contact with Sir Edward Carson, through her friendship with his second wife Ruby, formed naturally through common loyalties and beliefs:

Certainly most people would think we had sadly wasted our opportunities so intimate as we are with a Cabinet Minister!⁸ I am afraid I have played my b[rown] w[olf]'s cards very badly from a worldly point of view! I do believe it is more important for husband and wife to see eye to eye in this, than in almost anything else. Think of the misery for both of us if we didn't!⁹

⁶ Lilian's diary entry, 4 January 1899 (PRONI D/1633/2/1).

⁷ See document 308.

⁸ At this time Sir Edward Carson was a member of Lloyd George's War Cabinet.

⁹ See document 626.

Lilian's close association with the Carsons in wartime adds an important dimension to the Spender correspondence, as it enabled her to gain insights into British politics at a very high level.

Lilian was an acute observer of the actions and reactions of other people. She was conscious that her husband depended on her to convey news of the important political issues of the day but she also was adept at enlivening her letters with entertaining stories. Her disconcerting meeting with a former landlady in a department store is one such example.¹⁰ The fact that the conversation took place within hearing of two shop assistants put Lilian at a severe disadvantage, for in this rigidly class-structured age, she clearly felt humiliated on being publicly accused of not paying her debts. Never a retiring person, yet it is apparent that in the war years Lilian's self confidence and self reliance grew as she was obliged to deal with day to day problems. Not only had she to try to solve domestic worries and problems relating to accommodation and rationing, but she undertook the operation of the couple's finances — signing cheques, administering rents for property owned by the Spender family, negotiating leases on the property she occupied with her servants — and shouldered the additional responsibility of her work with the Ulster Division Comforts Fund. After the war Lilian emerged with a more forceful voice and it is not improbable that the government, hearing the rising tones of feminism, succumbed to pressure to enfranchise women over thirty in the Representation of the People Act (1918). Lilian, however, had always strongly disapproved of suffragette tactics and was never an activist.

ANIMAL IMAGERY IN THE CORRESPONDENCE

One distinguishing feature of the correspondence is the couple's use of animal imagery. The practice was probably established in childhood, for within the Spender family Wilfrid was known as 'Wolf' clearly deriving from Wilf(rid). Lilian added the adjective 'brown' from the colour of his hair, shortened to 'b.w.'. Wilfrid reciprocated, naming Lilian his 'pet rabbit' or 'pr' full stops omitted, often teasing by his use of the initials: he wanted a particular remedy;¹¹ he would have to stop prattling¹² and so on. During their separation this became a form of intimate word play that constantly recurs and for some readers it may become a distraction. But of course it did not occur to the Spenders, communicating on a daily basis, that their letters would be published or their intimacies revealed. Depending on his mood at the time, Wilfrid might describe himself as 'an old grey wolf'¹³ or a bw with an 'angry switching tail'.¹⁴ The images are normally intensely visual. Between March 1916 and July 1918 Lilian paid several visits to the Carson's holiday bungalow on the Isle of Thanet in Kent. One such visit elicited this response from Wilfrid:

¹⁰ See document 631.

¹¹ See document 860.

¹² See document 884.

¹³ See document 944.

¹⁴ See document 764.

I am so glad the weather did manage to recover its bad temper on Monday and let you bathe but it is sad that it was not earlier so that you would have promenaded — the cynosure of all eyes — with Sredward.¹⁵ [...] I can quite see a pr and a R[uby] C[arson], each with one of Sredward's arms, and a thing which might be a colly but isn't, trotting behind looking very proud when any one is looking, but a little wistful and forlorn when not.¹⁶

Lilian too participated in the word play. On the odd occasion when she expressed her love for her husband, she wrote that she found 'real tears' running down her furry face.¹⁷

Occasionally the animal imagery was extended to other people. Lilian's mother was known as the 'white bunny'¹⁸ or the 'white rabbit'¹⁹, also presumably from the colour of her hair, and in one extreme case, Wilfrid could not conceal his distaste for his Corps Commander, Major General Sir Henry de Lisle, referring to him as 'the Cheshire Cat'. 'The Cheshire Cat is back', he wrote in August 1918, 'and he and the BW did a good stalking round each other, growling and spitting being just beneath the surface of polished politeness'.²⁰ To intimates and family, Wilfrid continued to be 'Wolf' but few can have known that at one time Lilian was her bw's 'pet rabbit'.

Yet that the name 'pet rabbit' had no intellectual connotations, for Wilfrid always treated his wife as an equal, quickly refuting Lilian's suggestion that he was learned in history, law and politics:

Perhaps it is as well that you don't realize that if the bw talks learnedly it is only because he has learnt to swim a little when quite out of his depth, making use of the current, but he knows he is out of his depth and doesn't venture very far, even to show off to a pr, whilst when it comes to Literature the pr can paddle gaily whilst he is left in the scum of magazines and the froth of ill-written novels.²¹

Lilian was indeed interested in literature and her choice of books reflected the breadth of her interests, everything from the works of Oscar Wilde to books on philosophy and Japanese art.²² Her letters are strewn with literary and Biblical references noticeably absent in Wilfrid's. This wide reading may have added polish to her innate ability as a writer. In both cases there are few signs of revision or of re-writing.

When discussing future plans that would affect her, Wilfrid frequently asked for her opinion and advice. In August 1917 he considered standing as a Conservative Party candidate for parliament and was careful to consult Lilian before committing himself:

¹⁵ The Spenders adopted this nickname bestowed on Carson by men of the 36th (Ulster) Division.

¹⁶ See document 882.

¹⁷ See document 370.

¹⁸ See document 733.

¹⁹ See document 836.

²⁰ See document 884.

²¹ See document 765.

²² See document 315.

It looks to me as if the Government would be wise to have an election. I wonder what you feel if they do. I have a kind of idea I ought to stand as there is no-one 'in the House' who has an equal military knowledge — I don't except Gen' Hunter Weston!! — and immediately after the war one might be useful. If you agree, would you in the event of an election being certain, go or write to J[ames] Craig and say I have asked you to obtain his advice. [...] If you do not approve I will quite accept your negative and shall not repine.²³

Even though the Spenders had been married for less than a year when Wilfrid was recalled to the army, it is clear that their relationship was strong and close and able to withstand the stresses that war exacted. Only occasionally does the pain of their separation rise to the surface.

WILFRID'S VIEW OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

In his negotiations with the War Office Carson had extracted a promise that regular officers involved with the UVF would be posted to the 36th (Ulster) Division.²⁴ It seems that that concession was not to be extended to Wilfrid, who was offered instead a position in his old department at the War Office, the starting point for his involvement with Ireland, for it was while serving as secretary to a sub-committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence that he became aware of Ireland's strategic importance in the defence of the United Kingdom. In October 1915 Wilfrid and General Powell, General Nugent's predecessor as commander of the 36th Division, managed to get the decision reversed²⁵ and Wilfrid joined the Division as General Staff Officer, Grade 2 (GSO2) shortly before its embarkation for France.

Wilfrid's close identification with the 36th (Ulster) Division is beyond doubt. He might have chosen a safe job in Whitehall and set up house with Lilian in London but chose to join a fighting unit and submit himself to the horrors and uncertainty of life on the Western Front. These were his men, men he had helped to equip and train. A week before the Battle of the Somme he told Lilian that he felt himself 'the undoubted father of the Division'; he looked upon the men as if they were his children and felt the loss of any one of them.²⁶ His impassioned letter written the day after he witnessed the slaughter on the Somme revealed the depth of his anguish and grief.²⁷ Serving soldiers were discouraged from writing to the press, so that for many years the identity of the author was not known. 'Better to be a captain in this band of heroes,' Wilfrid suggested a few days later, 'than a Colonel in any other'.²⁸

When analysing battle techniques, military historians point to two different types

²³ See document 584.

²⁴ Timothy Bowman, *Carson's Army: the Ulster Volunteer Force 1910–22* (Manchester, 2007), p. 174.

²⁵ See document 86.

²⁶ See document 174.

²⁷ See document 222.

²⁸ See document 228.

of operation:²⁹ either a step by step advance to obtain a limited objective, known as 'bite and hold' or a sweeping breakthrough in an attempt to overwhelm the enemy by force of numbers, an operation that necessarily entailed many thousands of casualties. The Somme fell into the second category. After that disaster Wilfrid became a convinced advocate of the 'bite and hold' tactic. He abhorred anything in the nature of a gamble. Meticulous planning must precede an attack and every eventuality must be weighed and balanced. Exactly a year after the Somme Wilfrid, then a General Staff Officer, 1st Grade (GSO1) with the 31st Division, reported how his division had successfully secured Gavrelle Mill at the eastern end of the Arras battlefield against enemy attack:

I can tell you now that my division took part in the operations of a fortnight ago and did very well, taking all the objectives given to us on a 1200 yard frontage at little cost, tho' the enemy seems to have known of our intended attack. Our men grumble that they could have done far more if they had not been held back, but I do not regret that I had strongly advised a strictly limited success. It is the slow cautious policy which wins a war of this kind. There is no room for 'brilliant gambles' of the Winston Churchill pattern. It is simply steady pounding using to the full any advantages we now possess.³⁰

At all times Wilfrid sought to protect Lilian from the scenes of unimaginable carnage he must have encountered on a daily basis. If he mentioned death, it was usually stated simply and factually as when a soldier in the 36th Division drowned in a flooded trench.³¹ He emphasised not the cruelty of war but marvelled at its grandeur and the signs of regeneration in the midst of desolation. The possible duration of the war was of course a theme that recurs in the correspondence. Lloyd George, who succeeded Asquith as Prime Minister, was continually predicting the end of the war; Carson believed it would end in 1917, but Wilfrid, erring on the cautious, believed that it might linger on until the early months of 1919. Writing just three days before the German onslaught that began on 21 March 1918, Wilfrid felt it imperative that Germany should be defeated decisively and that that fact should be clear to the German people:

Our statesmen have made a great mistake in bewildering the public by talking of Alsace etc, as if these are what we are fighting for. Alsace, the German colonies etc are not worth another year's war *but* we have got to convince the Huns that their Boschism does not pay or we shall find ourselves in for another war in 40 years' time and it would be bad for the morale of the world till the end of its time. We have to

²⁹ Paddy Griffith, *Battle tactics of the Western Front: the British Army's art of attack 1916–18* (New Haven & London, 1994), p. 32.

³⁰ See document 550.

³¹ See document 97.

force the Huns to believe they are defeated and the terms do not matter a hang provided they betoken this.³²

This was not the only occasion that Wilfrid showed a degree of prescience. However, as the extent of German pillage towards the end of the war became apparent, Wilfrid's view hardened and some six months later he declared that he would starve the whole of Germany and would render the country desolate for thirty years, adding that that would not be one whit too severe for the German race.³³

Wilfrid was an inveterate writer of letters and notes. He was likely to seize a pen or pencil in protest or in praise, when moved or angered or shocked or surprised, or simply to convey a description of events. During the war his letters fall into two main categories: those he wrote to his wife and those to his family. All letters were, however, routed through Lilian and were returned to her, this being one reason why this collection is so comprehensive. To his family Wilfrid exchanged war news but his letters generally tend to be more descriptive and anecdotal in character than those he wrote to his wife. These were often concerned with his business interests or were occasions when political developments were discussed. Lilian became his 'special source'³⁴ reporting on the ousting of Asquith as Prime Minister and the part played by Carson in his downfall and the shape of the subsequent Lloyd George Cabinet. Occasionally Wilfrid revealed the extent of his love for his wife but usually he did not display his emotions. He kept them under control and expected his wife to do the same.

THE POLITICIANS

Throughout the correspondence Lilian was the conveyor of political information and Wilfrid often the political commentator. In the years 1916 to 1918, as one initiative was succeeded by another, Irish affairs were never absent for long from the political agenda. In mid-1916 Lloyd George's projected Heads of Settlement was stillborn, to be followed in 1917 by the deliberations of the Irish Convention. That also failed to come to an agreed solution. Increasing support for Sinn Féin was noted and the ever-present issue of Irish conscription, or compulsion as it was also known, was a running sore to serving soldiers and their supporters at home. The Easter Rising escaped much condemnation only because Wilfrid happened to be on leave at the time and their combined outrage at events in Dublin can only be imagined.

But what of Lilian's accuracy as a chronicler of events, what of her skill at presenting facts and her sensitivity at detecting shifts of opinion both in parliament and among those with whom she came in contact? Her judgements were at all times in accordance with the Spenders' political beliefs as Conservatives and Unionists. There is little understanding of the Irish Parliamentary Party and its desire for Home Rule

³² See document 769.

³³ See document 922.

³⁴ See document 654.

THE LETTERS

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CHAPTER 3

THE SOMME AND ITS AFTERMATH

JULY–DECEMBER 1916

The Somme – Home Rule negotiations – Wilfrid leaves the Ulster Division, his relations with General Nugent impaired – ‘Ki-Ki’ McCaw – intelligence work at GHQ – GSO1 with the 31st Division – disputed Irish recruiting figures – Asquith is ousted – Lloyd George forms a new ministry – President Wilson’s note and Germany’s offer of peace

219. PRONI D/1633/1/2/244, LILIAN SPENDER TO WILFRID AT ADVANCED DIVISIONAL HEADQUARTERS

34 Hill Street, 2 July 1916

It was lovely to get your letter last evening, and thank you *very* much for finding time to state your views for Sred. so clearly.¹ But oh, you can imagine how thrilled I was by last night’s news in the papers. I never dreamt that the first move would be in just that one particular piece of line.² I spent an hour or more with my maps this morning, following it all so far as the scanty information goes. I feel I can’t *write* about anything else either. Other matters feel so trivial and unimportant. I hadn’t realised that yesterday was the anniversary of the Battle of the Boyne. Edmund says yes, the weather was very bad for that too. [...]

220. PRONI D/1633/1/1/331, WILFRID SPENDER TO LILIAN IN LONDON

Hédauville, 2 July 1916

I want all our folks to work their hardest for our men – the thousands of brave wounded. Our Division broke right through the enemy lines in a way which I believe no other troops have ever done before, like our men have done.³ The enemy in our front were completely beaten. Then the disaster happened. The divisions on our flanks did not get up and we were in a trap, pounded on the right by every form of shell.

¹ See document 215 above.

² The 36th (Ulster) Division attacked in a line that stretched across the River Ancre dividing the division into a northern and a southern sector.

³ The unusual incoherence in Wilfrid’s letter resulted from his exposure to gas during the battle.

I saw men going up with water with shell all round, and deeds of heroism with wounded. We return to our former position to refit, but there is no making good our men. I got no shells except some lachrymatory gas⁴ which gave me a head – not yet gone – and made my eyes smart. A few shrapnel burst harmlessly overhead, but I would gladly have run some risks to have saved our men if I could. I'm afraid Rex will come out now and add to my anxieties. [...]

221. PRONI D/1633/1/1/346, WILFRID SPENDER TO LILIAN IN LONDON

Hédauville, 2 July 1916

I am a proud but saddened man. I have seen our men attack as no other men in the world could do, I believe. I have seen them win through an inferno, which other troops I believe have never got through. I have seen them advance as if in drill on parade winning the admiration of the next corps staff and of all who saw them. I know our men are sacrificing their lives by the thousand. I know that their cause is probably in vain owing to the failure on our right and left. I am not going into the question of our losses which are *very* heavy. [...] I don't intend to write of what I saw, but you can tell Sredward that I think half our men deserve VCs but will not get them of course.

222. PRONI D/1295/4/11, WILFRID SPENDER TO LILIAN IN LONDON

Hédauville, 2 July 1916

I am not an Ulsterman but yesterday as I followed their amazing attack I felt that I would rather be an Ulsterman than anything else in the world.

My position enabled me to watch the commencement of their attack from the wood in which they had formed up, but which, long prior to the hour of assault, was being overwhelmed with shell fire so that the trees were stripped and the top half of the wood ceased to be anything but a slope of bare stumps with innumerable shell holes pitted in the chalk. It looked as if nothing could live in the wood, and indeed the losses were heavy before they started, two companies of one battalion being reduced to a fourth in the assembly trenches. When I saw their men emerge out of the smoke and form up as if on parade, I could hardly believe my eyes.

Then I saw them attack, beginning at a slow walk over no-man's-land, and then suddenly let loose as they charged over the two front lines of the enemy's trenches shouting 'No surrender, Boys.' The enemy's gunfire raked them from the left, and machine guns in a village enfiladed them on the right, but battalion after battalion came out of that awful wood as steadily as I have seen them at Ballykinler, Clandeboye or Shane's Castle.⁵ The enemy's first, second and third lines were soon taken, and still the waves of men went on, getting thinner and thinner but without hesitation.

The enemy's fourth line fell before these men who would not be stopped. [...] I saw

⁴ The most common type of the lachrymatory gases was similar to modern tear gas, fatal only in massive doses.

⁵ The Ballykinler and Clandeboye army bases in County Down and Shane's Castle in County Antrim.

parties of them – now much reduced indeed – enter the fifth line of the enemy's trenches, our final objective. It could not be held as the Division had advanced into a narrow salient. The Corps on our right and left had been unable to advance so that the Ulstermen were the target of the concentrated hostile guns and machine guns behind and on both flanks, though the enemy in front were vanquished and retiring. The order to retire was given, but many parties preferred to die in the ground they had won so hardly. [...]

My pen cannot describe adequately the hundreds of heroic acts that I witnessed nor how yesterday a relieving force was organised of men who had already been fighting for 36 hours to carry ammunition and water to the gallant garrison still holding on.

The Ulster Division has lost more than half the men who attacked, and in doing so has sacrificed itself for the Empire which has treated them none too well. The much derided Ulster Volunteer Force has won a name which equals any in History. Their devotion, which no doubt has helped the advance elsewhere, deserves the gratitude of the British Empire. It is due to the memory of these brave heroes that their beloved Province shall be fairly treated.⁶

223. PRONI D/1633/1/1/332, WILFRID SPENDER TO LILIAN IN LONDON

Hédauville, 3 July 1916

Very thankful for your letters. Very sorry the pr had such a time with that demon Mrs V[anneck].⁷ I cannot write much about affairs here but have drafted out a very bald account, to which I do not think the censor can have any objection and which you might show Sir Edward and possibly to Mr. G[wynne]. [...] I could give you many accounts of deeds of wonderful heroism which I have seen or heard of but the tears come to my eyes if I try to state them. You will understand.

The Division – the remaining portion of it – is being withdrawn to its former area for refitting and rest. The men were determined to be before the regular division on our left who have been called the Incomparables and who did not succeed in getting forward. Our men succeeded in this only too well.

224. PRONI D/1633/1/2/246, LILIAN SPENDER TO WILFRID IN HÉDAUVILLE

34 Hill Street, 4 July 1916

Your two scraps of July 2nd have come,⁸ and I can think of nothing else. I never *dreamt* I should hear yet. It must have nearly broken your heart to watch such things but *oh*, how proud I am. I can't write about it. My heart is too full. It seems too cruel a thing to have happened that the flanking Divs. should have failed to come up. I ask

⁶ This letter was later printed in *The Times*, 7 July 1916, without the political references in the final paragraph viz. 'which has treated them none too well'; 'much derided'; and 'It is due to the memory of these brave heroes that their beloved Province shall be fairly treated'. All of these were included in the version printed in the Conservative *Morning Post*, also 7 July 1916. The author was not mentioned by name but was described as a correspondent in the *Morning Post*, and an eye-witness in *The Times*.

⁷ See document 218 above.

⁸ See documents 220 and 221 above.

nothing better than to spend my whole day if necessary at our work of helping the wounded. It isn't much to do, and oh how I wish one could do more. It is so glorious to know that our men are all and more than we thought them. [...] Words are simply useless, as you will understand. And yet, I don't know how to write or think of anything else. Thank God so few shells came your way. But to be watching it all must have been awful. Oh it's hard to sit at home with such things happening to you and our splendid men. But I can't be too thankful that I chose this work, and not the Laboratory work. I couldn't have borne not to be in touch with it all now. [...] I mean to try and get to see some of the men in London hospitals, so as to be more in touch with them. One wrote to me the other day and said that the chief thing he wanted was 'to get back for a good roll on the drums on July 12th'!! A true Orangeman, that!

225. PRONI D/1633/1/1/334, WILFRID SPENDER TO LILIAN IN LONDON

Hédauville, 4 July 1916

Your letters are the greatest help possible. I am so glad you like the house and its atmosphere, but a little sorry for the 2 maids not being able to go out together. Cannot you get some little girl in once a week so as to let them have an afternoon out?

I will not discuss the military situation as the papers will give you the news. *The Times* on the Irish question is too abominable. It is completely Home Rule now, but Carson's position is also somewhat anomalous. I'm afraid C[harles] Craig is wounded and a prisoner.⁹ If this is confirmed in the papers, please write to Mrs in both our names if you can spare the time. Cannot you get a girl typewriter¹⁰ to your office now and dictate your letters. This would be my contribution to the fund. [...]

My gas shell head[ache] has quite gone now, but yesterday my eyes were still giving me much trouble and I began to be anxious. Today they are quite all right.

The men are truly wonderful, and the General is about speaking to them, but the Ulster Division will of course get little credit for what it has done, because there is no one who likes to be associated with even a glorious failure. [...]

226. PRONI D/1633/1/1/335, WILFRID SPENDER TO LILIAN IN LONDON

Hédauville, 5 July 1916

[...] Our men are quite cheery and saying they don't want any Derby recruits.¹¹ The Gen' wrote an excellent order of the day and made a very nice speech to all the b[riga]des nearly breaking down.¹² Somehow he fails to strike the spark, so the

⁹ Captain Charles Craig, the MP for South Antrim, had indeed been wounded and was taken prisoner but survived the war.

¹⁰ In the early twentieth century the term 'typewriter' applied both to the machine and its operator.

¹¹ The 'Derby' recruits, named after the 17th Earl of Derby, Director of Recruiting (1915-16), were those single men of military age who attested voluntarily their willingness to serve and who were being called up after the appalling casualties in the Battle of the Somme. It was believed that these men lacked training and experience.

¹² Major General Oliver Nugent spoke of his pride in 'the magnificent example of sublime courage and discipline' which the Ulster Division had given to the army. Quoted in Philip Orr, *The Road to the Somme Men of the Ulster Division tell their story* (Belfast, 1987), p. 191.

officers say, tho' it is absolutely genuine. I think he cannot quite forget himself. [...]

I have written to Mrs. Davidson of the Sirocco works¹³ whose son was killed after earning the VC,¹⁴ and to Jenkins of Larne¹⁵ who was wounded; also briefly to Craig about his brother of whom we have still no news except of his gallantry. Some of our men returned yesterday after having held a post in the distant lines nearly 2,000 yards beyond our lines for 36 hours: 8 men against an army. [...]

227. PRONI D/1633/1/2/248, LILIAN SPENDER TO WILFRID IN HÉDAUVILLE

34 Hill Street, 5 July 1916

My own most dear B.W., I got your dear letter this evening, and your fearfully interesting enclosure.¹⁶ I can scarcely keep the tears back as I read about it, so what it must be to you who *saw* it I can hardly bear to think. Ruby rang me up this evening to tell me that Lady Londonderry was there and had told them about Capt. C. C[raig] and Col. P[akenham]¹⁷ and also what splendid things were being said about the Ulstermen. Oh my B.W. you must know now what 'a bleeding heart' means. If only I could be with you, but I *am* with you in spirit. Words are *no* use. I give it up. I told Ruby I had heard from you, and I have posted one copy to Sredward tonight, and one to Mr. Gw[yenne] as I know he will like to see it anyway. It does comfort me so to feel that my letters help you, my B.W. and that p.r. herself can be some help, even at a distance. [...]

Thursday Such a busy day here. It's after 4, and Ruby, Gladys and Ivy and I have all been working here till just now, when the others have gone, and I am staying just to finish my letter to you. Several of the men wounded on July 1st have written to me to say they are in hospital, and we have long lists from the W.O. as well, so are extra busy. Sred. was so pleased with your account of Saturday that he sent a message to me by Ruby to ask if he might send it to the papers, so I said he could do anything he liked with it. [...] Mr. Lack (Director of Robinson of Cleaver [*sic*] who is such a help to us) came in this morning in great distress to know if we could find out anything about his son in the 14th R.I.R. who is wounded. Ruby promised to try, and I gave him your account of the battle to read. [...]

I'm so thankful your eyes are all right again, old thing, and your headache too. I too am a little unhappy about the maids, and think perhaps I might get someone in once a week to let them get out together.¹⁸

¹³ The Sirocco works in east Belfast manufactured ventilation and fan machinery, specialising in tea-drying equipment.

¹⁴ Captain James S. Davidson of the 13th Royal Irish Rifles, was injured in enemy trenches and shot dead by a German sniper. Wilfrid's letter has survived. 'Your son fell after gallantry which deserved the Victoria Cross,' he wrote, 'and was killed when his men had at last persuaded him to consent to letting them carry him back.' Quoted in Steven Moore, *The Irish on the Somme* (Belfast, 2005), p. 199. Captain Davidson was not awarded the Victoria Cross.

¹⁵ In fact, Major A.P. Jenkins of Lisburn, ex-UVF.

¹⁶ See document 222 above.

¹⁷ Lieutenant Colonel H.A. Pakenham (1863 -1937) raised and commanded 11th (Service) Battalion, R.I.R.

¹⁸ See document 225 above.

228. PRONI D/1295/4/12, WILFRID SPENDER TO FAMILY IN LONDON

Rubempré, 6 July 1916

I have seen a chapter of history of which the most glorious page was written before my eyes by the Ulster Division. Tho' practically we have small fruits now still left in our hands, merely a few hundred yards of trench, the Ulster Division on the 1st July won through further than any other troops, British or French, and got into the last German line in spite of the most terrible losses. If it had been possible for any of the flanking force to get through at all, we should have led the way to the greatest victory in history. As it is, we have done much I hope to help the progress elsewhere. The nearly 600 prisoners¹⁹ in our hands prove that our men were merciful in victory though I do not suppose half of the prisoners taken, or even one quarter, were able to get to our lines, being shot down by the enemy's fire. [...]

I feel humble and proud to belong to this Division. Better to be a captain in this band of heroes than a Colonel in any other. I am unable to write of what I witnessed as the tears come to my eyes. There were times when I honestly believe it was easier to act than to stand and watch, a powerless spectator. For some reason the Germans left my part of the line practically untouched and except for the discomfiture of some gas shells, I have no claim to have taken part in this battle. So many of our best are dead or wounded prisoners, whom we had to leave, that one can hardly count the number who have earned the Victoria Cross and a higher reward. [...]

***The Division is now in three little villages – all that remains of them – regaining strength for the next ordeal.²⁰

229. PRONI D/1633/1/2/249, LILIAN SPENDER TO WILFRID IN RUBEMPRÉ

Lady Carson's Ulster Division Comforts Fund, 6 July 1916

A wildly busy day. Lady Leitrim worked here all morning, and Ruby and her aunt, Miss Frewen. [...] They were very sweet to me. Ruby said, 'I'm going to carry her off next weekend *whatever* the work is like, and I told Edward so, as *what* would happen if Mrs. Spender collapsed!' But there's no fear of that, I'm quite fit. I'm so relieved to hear Col. Pakenham is all right.²¹ Of course you will have seen your letter in full in the *M.P.* and *Times*, and I daresay in others as well, as Sred. sent it to the Press Assoc. The *Daily Mail* rang him up to say Press censor had deleted some bits of it, but the *M.P.* put them in after all! Of course, it's the part about their not having been too well treated by the Empire etc!²² [...]

***Rather proud of your letter! It reads so well in the paper.

¹⁹ According to Cyril Falls, the figure was five hundred and forty-three. Cyril Falls, *The History of the 36th (Ulster) Division* (London, 1996), p. 59.

²⁰ The division moved back to Rubempré and two neighbouring villages on 5 July 1916.

²¹ See document 227 above.

²² See footnote 6 above.

230. PRONI D/1633/1/1/338, WILFRID SPENDER TO LILIAN IN LONDON

Rubempré, 7 July 1916

If you are staying with the Carsons, try to cheer him up with an account of how the Division has behaved. Not even he could have expected such heroism from our men. I wonder if you gave him my message the other day.²³ I look upon it as important that he should know, in view of his apparent intimacy with LG now. Sredward will trust my word in this I know.

I see that Sinn Feiners are all being reinstated now,²⁴ and have little doubt that Casement will not be executed²⁵ and will be feted in less than a year. The 'loyal rebels' are apparently not to be amnestied or Harrel and myself might find ourselves in a very different position.

Yesterday a GHQ car was going by and pulled up sharply and who should pop out but Butler, now Major Gen, Gen Staff. He shook me warmly by the hand and asked after our men. It was a curious meeting after these years. He spoke confidently but gave no news of importance.

The weather is bad but tho' hard for our men, I hope that it may affect the German harvest which might prove the deciding factor in the war. [...]

231. PRONI D/1633/1/2/251, LILIAN SPENDER TO WILFRID IN RUBEMPRÉ

34 Hill Street, 9 July 1916

Old Lady Londonderry rang me up in the morning to ask me for a list of Co. Down men in hospital in London, so that she could go and see them. We talked for some time, and finally she said she would come round to the Depôt on Monday morning and see me, and get the list, and discuss how best to get them moved, when convalescent, to her son's country place. She said 'I suppose you know that my son²⁶ tried hard to get into the Ulster Division,' and then we talked about the Division, and our pride in it. [...] Mrs. Hessey came in to help yesterday too, and came back after luncheon, and so did Lady Leitrim. I think I told you about poor Mrs. Penny coming in to try and get news of her husband in the 9th Innisks. I gave her my list of wounded officers which Cox sends me once a week, and she found in the 9th whom she was going to write to. It was most painful, and I felt so desperately sorry for her. I shewed Mr. Falls' account²⁷ to Lady Leitrim, and she begged so hard to be allowed to take it to 'Charlie' that I let her, but she has promised to bring it back to me on Monday. [...]

²³ See document 223 above.

²⁴ After the Easter rising, the government interned nearly two thousand prisoners. Early releases came at the beginning of July 1916.

²⁵ Casement was hanged at Pentonville gaol in London on 3 August 1916.

²⁶ Charles S.H. Vane-Tempest-Stewart, 7th Marquess of Londonderry (1878-1949).

²⁷ Captain Cyril Falls, General Staff, later author of the official history of the 36th (Ulster) Division.

232. PRONI D/1633/1/2/253, LILIAN SPENDER TO WILFRID IN RUBEMPRÉ

34 Hill Street, 10 July 1916

[...] This room was quite full of helpers this morning: Ruby, the Duchess and Lady Mary,²⁸ Lady Leitrim, Lady Farnham, Mrs Mordaunt,²⁹ Miss Frewin (Ruby's aunt), Mrs White and Miss Williams, 2 new helpers, Mrs Hessey, dear Mrs Macauley,³⁰ who is over from Belfast for a little, and her daughter Mrs Bennett! Quite a party, and all wildly busy. [...]

Squiffy's speech is *precisely* what I expected. Never was there anyone so clever at saying two exactly opposite things in the same speech. 'The Settlement' is both permanent and temporary, and I suppose each party is meant to see only the one meaning.³¹ He doesn't seem to realise that both parties will inevitably see both sentences, so neither will be satisfied.

233. PRONI D/1633/1/1/341, WILFRID SPENDER TO LILIAN IN LONDON

Bernaville, 11 July 1916

We expect to go shortly a little way away to a training area at which we shall, I suppose, get our drafts, but one's heart fails one a little at making up our battalions with $\frac{3}{4}$ of Derby recruits. The Ulster Division, which I think I can fairly claim to have helped train, can never be the same again. I doubt if its equal will ever be seen in the history of mankind. The newspaper reticence has been changed into something approaching gush and I am a little afraid of it being overdone. [...]

234. PRONI D/1633/1/2/254, LILIAN SPENDER TO WILFRID IN BERNAVILLE

34 Hill Street, 11 July 1916

I have hesitated a long time about sending your enclosures to the *M.P.*,³² but have finally decided to do so. I don't *think* it is going behind Sredward's back, and I think it is well that he and C[raig] should realise that point of view. It may be a little difficult for me if they comment on it next weekend if it appears, but I think one should have the courage of one's convictions, though I'm not sure that I shall give the authorship away unless much is said. [...]

I had a strenuous afternoon, shopping, and came back late to tea. Later on I went to our little 'Prayer meeting' at Lady Hilda Strutt's,³³ taking Gladys with me. Lady

²⁸ Lady Mary, the eldest daughter of the Duke and Duchess of Abercorn.

²⁹ Mrs Mordaunt was a relative of Lilian's friend, Mrs Eva Borton of Belfast.

³⁰ Mrs Sue Macauley, whom Lilian met in November 1913 shortly after her arrival in Belfast.

³¹ In a statement to the House, the Prime Minister said on the one hand that Lloyd George's proposed Bill was 'a provisional measure,' yet he appealed to the House and the country to take advantage of an opportunity 'to provide at any rate the seed and germs of a lasting settlement of this question.' Parl. Debates, HoC, LXXXIV, 58-61, 10 July 1916.

³² Wilfrid sent a covering note to the Editor, *Morning Post*, with the following letter which was clearly intended for publication: 'Sir, As the Unionists now require a new title, may I suggest the Great Illusionist Party. In case those in the South of Ireland wish to be distinguished, perhaps Disillusioned will do. It admits of easy contraction! "*Dished*" B.E.F., 9th July '16.'

³³ Lady Hilda Clements Strutt, died 7 April 1919, sister of the 5th Earl of Leitrim.

Leitrim's mother, Mrs. Henderson, was there, and Lady Leitrim and Lady Hilda, no-one else. Rather a nice thing happened. Lady Hilda and I were talking, before we began, about the Ulster Division, and she said, 'One of the things I liked best in the papers was the man who said he wished he'd been born an Ulsterman. Did you see it?' P.R. began to sparkle, and then said very softly, 'As a matter of fact, it was my husband!' And Lady H. was *so* delighted. She said it had touched her more than anything else. You remember she is Lord Leitrim's sister. Wasn't it nice?

Wed. 12th *The* 12th! We are working early and late, the lists are too appalling. G[ladys] and I have been here all day. [...] Mr. Gw[ynne] was lunching with Sred. today, but I've heard no details yet.

235. PRONI D/1633/1/1/342, WILFRID SPENDER TO LILIAN IN LONDON

Bernaville, 12 July 1916

[...] I am getting a little restive at the way my letters get into the papers! My one to you was all right tho' only intended for Mr. G[wynne]'s private perusal, but I wrote a personal one to Col Crawford and a letter of condolence to Mrs. Davidson³⁴ and it never occurred to me that these would be published. I suppose one ought not to mind but it seems lacking in delicacy and I should certainly have written very differently had I known. Luckily in some ways Sir G[eorge] also published the General's letter and his orders. He is rather tried about it. I also wrote to Gen Powell and Sir G[eorge]. I do hope the latter won't take mine to the Press! It is private on the face of it.

We are now in country like Norfolk which is very much nicer than I had expected, but we move another 15 miles tomorrow when I expect the country will be still flatter and more full of dykes, and perhaps less healthy. We expect to be left alone for some weeks getting out drafts and training them – rather sad work in some ways as you can understand, especially as they will not be our men. [...]

A sorry 12th July but our men are wearing their lilies tho' whether bought or stolen or presented, I don't know. Most of them have had long marches, so I don't expect they will do much drumming.

Saunderson aged 55(?)³⁵ is to succeed Farnham as ADC. He is said to have a very rude manner and a bad temper but this may pay with the GOC and Farnham who has done splendid work has, I hope, taught Henry his job. [...]

Yes, I am indeed glad you took up this work and not the other now,³⁶ and I think you are probably doing more for the future of Ulster than either of us quite wot³⁷ of. Any neglect now would certainly spread and make a gulf between the classes which the UVF days have closed for a time.

³⁴ See document 226 above.

³⁵ In fact Major Saunderson was 48 in 1916.

³⁶ See document 224 above.

³⁷ Wit, trans. and intrans. verb, to know. Present tense I, he wot, archaic.