

Chapter 1: A Man of His Times:

A socialist, a Christian, a Unitarian. A prolific reader. A follower of Tolstoy's ideals. Not an extraordinary man – but by no means an ordinary one.

A deep thinker who perhaps laboured too much on some important issues at the cost of making progress. As brave as any man who served in the horrors of the battlefields of France and Flanders but one for who earlier travels to even more distant parts helped set his moral compass.

At times indecisive and forgetful. A quiet revolutionary. Perhaps a slightly uncomfortable native of his times – inspired by the radical social ideals emerging at the start of the 20th century based on a great sense of duty to mankind. A gentle man and a philosopher who celebrated the human spirit, the value of education, of nature and continual learning.

These are some of the characteristics of Charles Lionel Briggs – Leo or Lionel - that emerge from the letters he wrote to his fiancé Hilda Hankinson whilst on service as a Private and nursing orderly in the Royal Army Medical Corp in France during the first World War.

EE Hall of Boston Grammar wrote of him: *“He was a cosmopolitan. His sympathies were universal. He believed more fully perhaps than most that to each one belongs the responsibility of the whole world, he was deeply touched by the sufferings of the starving. He held his opinions conscientiously and arrived at his conclusions only after deep thinking. He was conscientious, sincere and unassuming”*.



Born 6th September 1877 in Lower Clapton, Hackney, London, to Thomas James and Isabella Briggs – Lionel was writing in these letters to his fiancé, Hilda Hankinson, 5 years younger – born 17th January 1882.



The letters were written between April 1915 and February 1919 when he was in his late thirties and early forties. They are not a complete record of all Leo had to say - but the 150 plus letters that remain tell stories that cover the couple's romance, the experience of War and memories of the remarkable mix of contemporary intellectuals he knew from before his time in France.

Several annotations and margin notes show that in the years that followed, Hilda read and re-read the letters – and edited out a few that were perhaps just too “personal” between the two lovers.

The letters have been numbered in date order by Hilda. The earliest is numbered 44 – and the last 257. However, four un-numbered letters date from Lionel's time in training – and up to his embarkation for France in May 1916. Several of the “missing” numbers are allocated to “Field Post Cards”. (See – The Mail System).

Lionel's words reveal that Hilda wrote to her Leo nearly every day – as well as sending parcels of food and supplies. But what of those letters?

They were obviously treasured, read and re-read by Lionel on many occasions - as he indicates in November 1917.

Sweetheart of mine, what I should like to do at the present moment – next to being by your side – is to sit down for a good hour or two and go through all your letters of the last moment with which my pocket is bulging – (you know how it is wont to do that !) – but that would take up all the time I have for writing, so after running through just the last three, I must plunge into my own letter. (122)

And again in two separate letters from June and November 1918

Dearest Heart, I am going to give myself an hour with you, though it will have been more than that in the end, for I have already had half an hour sitting in this farm yard ... reading through your last half dozen letters. I do so enjoy doing that when I can give myself the time, for it links up your days for me and gives me a more connected picture of you than is possible when I read them only from day to day. (178)

In the first place, it was only yesterday evening that I came into my treasure of accumulated letters, and I spent goodness knows how many hours reading them, while three more from you came at the very last minute just before I got into bed. (224)

From Leo's many words it is clear that Hilda wrote at length about her days, her family, her work, her worries and their friends, but put together, they were too many for those "bulging pockets" – and their fate becomes apparent in May 1917.

But now to leave things over here for a bit and get back to your letters. By the bye, I destroyed about 30 of them this morning before we started our march. It always seems to me such a shame when I have to do that, there is so much in them that is dear to me and they represent so many happy hours and thoughts shared between us, that if I didn't keep reminding myself that you and your love are with me just the same, the process would succeed in making me quite miserable.

However, by dint of doing that, I manage to turn away from the ashes with a smile in my heart and feeling as rich as ever – well nearly so ! for after all, it is a shame to have to destroy them. (80)

Whilst some of the letters are written in trying or difficult circumstances – others reflect a quieter time and even a peaceful – if brief – interlude.

17th May 1918

Good evening, sweetheart – a greeting kiss !

There's nothing doing at present, so I'm sitting down at one of the school desks (did I tell you our dressing room was a school room ?)- with a couple of candles stuck in the pencil groove along the top edge, only it is so warm that I have to keep straightening them up as they insist on bowing to one another !

We've had a frightfully hot day and seem to be getting now the kind of weather you had a week or more ago, when we were indulging in very chilly grey days. They finished up with a good drop of rain and now for 3 or 4 days or more it has been lovely and a joy to see everything growing at full speed – the rye has shot up about a foot in a week – it's no use – I've had to put out one of the candles - and the late foliage poplars have unfolded their crimson tinted leaves which are already beginning to lose their autumn like colouring.

The May is out and bumble bees dart about with an energy that one doesn't usually associate with them. The cuckoo is about too but somehow he doesn't seem to have got his note right yet. The frogs commence to croak in the dykes and remind us of the first days we were out here at le Sant. Poor M Calomne ! - I expect his farm is a mass of ruins by now ! (172).

The language Leo uses reflects the man, his education and his period. If not florid, to today's reader the words used can still, at times, feel a little over blown and slow to make a point. However, this only seems to match the style of many letters of men at war at the time. Perhaps this represents a shared attempt to sustain a connection with more civilized times amidst the horrors of the War.

Lionel received his education at Framlingham College in Suffolk, where in 1892, he won the Packard Prize for Science. Despite his scientific abilities, his love of literature led him to become an Arts undergraduate at Liverpool University College, where he obtained his BA in 1899 at the age of 21. Thereafter his feelings for the humanities steered him to Manchester College, Oxford (the non-denominational Unitarian college) as a student for the Unitarian Ministry where he was to obtain his Master of Arts degree in 1902.

In the 1901 census, Charles Lionel Briggs is living with his widowed mother Isabella, 62 and brother Harold at number 7, Station Road, Hanborne, Edgbaston, Birmingham. The family are lodgers with George A Clifford and his young family. Lionel's entry under "occupation" confirms that he is a "Student for the Unitarian Ministry".

Known always as Lionel or Leo (never Charles), he returned to Liverpool in 1903 to take charge of the Domestic Mission there; but after a year working in a parochial capacity, at the age of 26, he had developed thoughts that the Ministry was not his vocation after all, and he became interested in gardening, intensive horticulture and beekeeping.

Meanwhile, Hilda was living in Halesowen, as a student of Physical Education at Rhoda Anstey's Physical Training College, Leasowes.

From around 1903/4, after his time at the Liverpool Mission, and having been inspired by a speech in Liverpool on the plight of the Dhukobor communities in Tsarist Russia, Leo went to live and work with the exiled "Tolstoyian" community that Tcherkoff, later to be Tolstoy's literary executor (see Famous People) established at Tuckton near Bournemouth.

A letter of the time from Tchertkoff, identifies that Lionel was engaged both to develop horticulture and grow food for the community and to provide secretariat support to the Free Age Press. The Press had been established to provide low cost editions of liberal, socialist and left wing writings of the time – including Tolstoy’s later philosophical and religious works.

This led, In 1904 and 1905, to Lionel making two journeys to Russia to meet Leo Tolstoy. The trips were disguised as advisory visits based on Lionel’s horticultural expertise but were secretly to consult the author and discuss publication of his latter works that were banned under the Tsar’s pre-revolutionary regime.

By the time of the 1911 Census, our correspondents here are each recorded at the addresses used for nearly all the wartime letters.

Lionel is living with “dear Mother” Isabella and brother Harold at Laurel Cottage, Lickey End whilst Hilda lives 3 miles away with her 70 year old father John Hankinson and mother Margaret (66) at High House Farm Alvechurch.

As well as 2 servants, sister Rachel and brother Ralph share the house. Of Ralph there is more to hear!



High House at Alvechurch c1910

Lionel is now recorded as a market gardener and an “employer” working from home. Hilda is a Gymnastics teacher. By the time of the letters Hilda is a regular visitor to Isabella and a help to all who are living at both houses.

Exactly how Hilda and Lionel came to know one another is not clear but it may have been either through their attendance at the Unitarian Church in Bromsgrove or through related liberal/socialist associations that both Briggs and Hankinson families were significantly engaged with.

The Unitarian church had been a long time home to liberal thought to which Hilda's father and grandfather had been closely attached since at least when they lived next door to the Unitarian Chapel at Dean Row, Wilmslow and before a move to the Midlands in the 1890's.

Ten years later, in one of the early war time letters sent whilst Lionel was on training in Essex in April 1915, the Russian and Tolstoyian connections bring about a set of coincidences as Lionel grasps a chance for some further education whilst on a visit to a Mrs Clarke in nearby Maldon.

I also found there a Belgian soldier, the husband of Mrs Clarke's companion, a man who has been wounded and is about to start for France again, and a private of the Worcesters, a man of 45 named Naylor, from Evesham – a friend of the Smalls !!

(John Small was a business partner and friend of Lionel and his brother Harold when they lived at Laurel Cottage, Lickey End. Small also plays a number of significant parts in Lionel and Hilda's story in both 1918 and 1919.)



Laurel Cottage at Lickey End.

This man and a friend of his, now at the front, are both practically Tolstoyans, and when it came out that I had lived with Russians in England for some time, Mrs Clarke said "It wasn't with Tchurtkoff, (sic) was it?" I had forgotten that he lived for some time at Maldon, before he went to Christchurch. She had not known him herself, but her husband had told her about him.

Altogether you can see I made some interesting acquaintances. (25/04/15 000)

The story of Leo's relationship and dealings with Tolstoy and Tchertkoff are covered later, but a short look into these earlier times, perhaps gives an insight into his motivation, moral and political compass.

In July 1918 there is a short reference to his interest and experience.

....Another book I have read just lately is Maurice Baring's "Mainsprings of Russia" – I fancy that's the title. I found it in the little library at the Canteen Hut where I frequently wrote my letters until our move a week ago. It gives a very good and sympathetic idea of Russia without being in any way blind to the national defects. (191)

In September 1918 – the subject comes up again in the context of post revolution Russia and it's capitulation to Germany under the Brest Litovsk peace agreement.

Twice, sweetheart, you ask me what I think about Russia. Well of course I can form no real judgement. No one can in these days unless they are on the spot (and it's a large spot there !) or else have a much greater knowledge of the many sides of the case than one can glean from the papers. But certainly, there doesn't seem much room for optimism as far as one can see.

It all seems most pitiable. The worst of it is, one cannot tell whether the Allies have done the best thing in interfering or not. The one thing that comforts me as regards that is that America is in it too and we know that she at any rate has a genuine sympathy for Russia and not only for the reactionaries.

Of course I don't feel at all like condemning the Bolsheviks out and out, though they have certainly been driven to terrible actions. (203)

So, as an introduction, perhaps the most apt modern description of Leo's position on beliefs and politics would place him as "Christian anarchist". An apparent oxymoron whose foundation is a rejection of violence as laid out in Tolstoy's "The Kingdom of God is Within You" (1894).

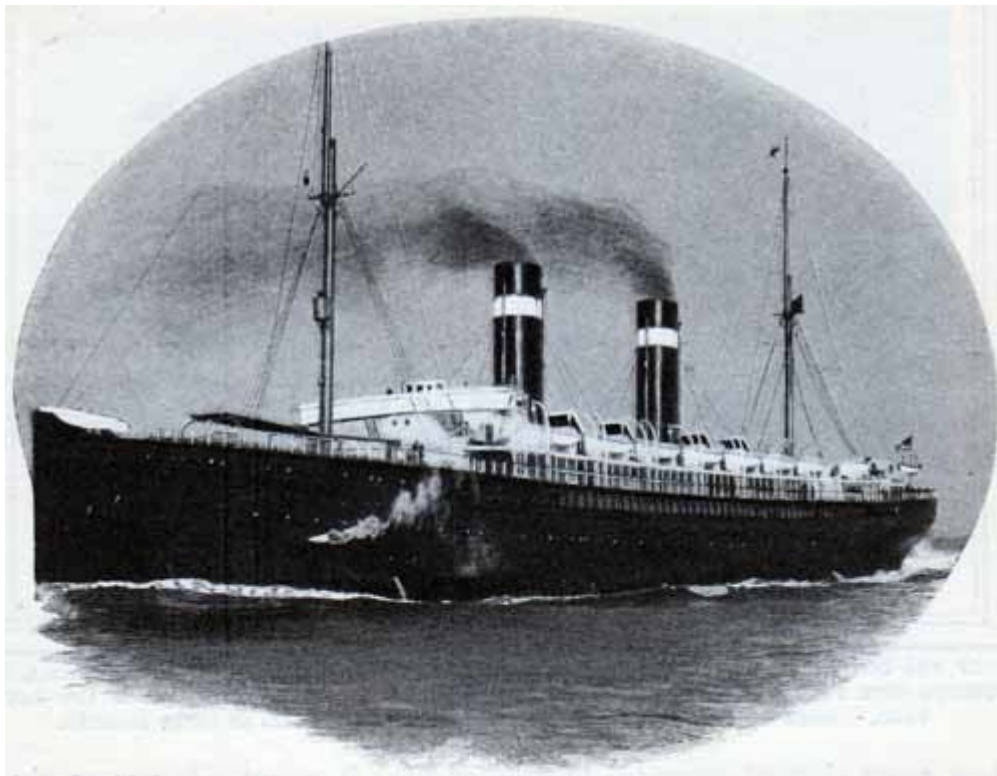
In this Tolstoy separates Russian Orthodox Christianity, (then merged with the state), from what he believed was the true message of Jesus and the four Gospels - and specifically the Sermon on the Mount.

Tolstoy states that all governments who wage war, and the churches that support them, are an affront to the Christian principles of non-violence and non-resistance. Tolstoy never actually uses the term "Christian anarchism" but later reviewers coin the term.

“ Not only does the action of Governments not deter men from crimes; on the contrary, it increases crime by always disturbing and lowering the moral standard of society. Nor can this be otherwise, since always and everywhere a Government, by its very nature, must put in the place of the highest, eternal, religious law (not written in books but in the hearts of men, and binding on every one) its own unjust, man-made laws, the object of which is neither justice nor the common good of all but various considerations of home and foreign expediency. ” – Leo Tolstoy, The Meaning of the Russian Revolution.

These words perhaps cast some light on Lionel's decision to volunteer as a non-combatant Private in the Royal Army Medical Corps in the early months of 1915.

Immediately before, in 1913/14 – Leo had travelled to Canada and then to New York. He was engaged in teaching – probably in horticulture - and in possible association with Tolstoyian communities that were being established on the East Coast of Canada. Two earlier letters from before his enlistment are written from New York as Leo prepared to return on the SS St Paul in December 1914 - and he refers to his time across the Atlantic in his first “military” letter written on the 25th April 1915, from the military training camp at Witham near Colchester, Essex.



SS St Paul

Last night, dear, I lay awake a long time, smoking a pipe. My mind went wandering over the past and the future, as it has not done for some time. The date reminded me of what was happening a year ago. June 29th was the eve

of the school public examination, and didn't I wish that the next day were fairly over. I can recall it all so vividly – the preparations at the school, the waiting for the visitors, the flowers Jessie Tompkins brought, the exam itself and the basket of nuts and candies that I sent for from the store and distributed at the end.

And then very early next morning, goodbye to it all and away to New York. How long ago it all is, and how the world has changed since then ! What a richness life takes on when we look back on it ! To be able to see the same and more in the present and the future is a power worth striving for, isn't it ? Colchester: 30/6/15

Name of Ship St Paul Date of Arrival 14 Dec 1914 Whence arrived New York
 Port of Arrival Liverpool Steamship Line American

10. 33 1c.

NAMES AND DESCRIPTIONS OF BRITISH PASSENGERS

(1) Port of Embarkation	(2) Port at which Passengers have been landed	(3) Cabin	(4) NAME OF PASSENGER	(5) CLASS (Passenger 1st, 2nd or 3rd)	(6) Profession, Occupation or Calling of Passenger	(8) AGES OF PASSENGERS (Specify sex and age)				(7) Country of last Permanent Residence	(9) Country of Intended Future Permanent Residence						
						Adults	Children under 12	Infants	Under 2		England	Wales	Scotland	Ireland	Foreign	Other Countries	
New York	Liverpool		Atkinson John S. John	1st	Engineer	40				England							
"	"		Amos R.	3	Coal fireman	40				"							
"	"		Aidan-Hilde Thomas		None	23				Canada							
"	"		Bell W. J. William		Steward	30				"							
"	"		Carlson Clarence W.		"	27				"							
"	"		Carroll Thomas		Engineer	50				England							
"	"		Chick Robert		"	29				"							
"	"		de Amy Jane		Stewardess	27			2	"							
"	"		de Robert W.		Child	2				"							
"	"		Briggs Chas. L.		Teacher	37				Canada							
"	"		Brown W. W.		None	20				"							
"	"		Brown W. W.		"	18				U.S.A.							
"	"		de Louis		Steward	24				"							
"	"		de Wm.		Steward	24				"							
"	"		Barber Byron		Mechanic	46				"							
"	"		Baughman Harry		Mechanic	40				England							
"	"		de Barton Alfred		None	57				Belgium							
"	"		Bond Arthur		None	33				Canada							
"	"		Clay Robert A.		None	34				France							
"	"		Collier William		Miner	24				U.S.A.							
"	"		Crossell Henry		Coal fireman	23				France							
"	"		Clavin Paul		None	20				U.S.A.							
"	"		Carmichael John		Steward	18				"							
"	"		de Edith		Child	3				"							
"	"		American Day		Stewardess	27				"							

Passenger Manifest SS St Paul: Briggs Chas. L. is recorded as landing at Liverpool from the St Paul on the 14th of December 1914 having previously been resident in Canada working as a teacher.

And again in December 1917.

By the bye, I turned up in my pocket book the other day a delightful letter I had from Alice (New York) in March 1915 ! I have carried it ever since ! Just fancy ! 3 years since I left the dear folk ! and 3 years ago almost today I was approaching old England and the home folk and you ! When shall we be able

to pick up some of the old threads ? You will be glad I know to hear that I have managed at last to write to dear old A.F. (128)

Within three months of his return to England via Liverpool Leo had volunteered as part of “Kitcheners Army” soon after the failures of the British Expeditionary Forces at the Battle of Mons in December 1914. This was long before conscription was introduced in January 1916.

A 1974 letter from AW Isaacs suggests that Lionel volunteered for the South Midlands Field Ambulance at the same time as Isaacs in January 1915 – and that their earliest shared military experience was at the Great Brook Street Barracks, Birmingham. The base for the RAMC in the Midlands.

By the time of his first letter from the forces on training in Colchester, Leo is allocated to B Section, 2nd/1st South Midlands Field Ambulance and he will remain with this unit for the duration.

So how did Lionel approach writing his letters? The first note that remains from France in January 1917 shows an attempt at a systematic approach:

Dearest, how often my plans for writing “gang agley” ! (sic) It was to have been written yesterday, but yesterday passed and today has nearly passed and it won't be written today – nor tomorrow, probably !

This is what has happened. Yesterday morning was spent in attending sick parade and going for a walk of an hour and a half. It's killing to be stuck in the dark dug-out all day long and night long too. After dinner, as I had been feeling much lately what a pity your dear letters got so inadequately answered – each one really demands a reply in itself – I got out all that were in my pocket – the last fortnight's collection – and I began going through them with much enjoyment. I think I must have been at it until well after tea, granted a few unavoidable interruptions, and at the end of that time I had a list of nearly 40 matters upon which I wanted to touch, apart from other matters that might occur to me un-suggested by you !

Some undertaking eh ? But a very delightful one, given the time. (57)

This introduction hopefully sketches out Leo as a highly cultured man of strong beliefs and convictions and explains his choice of the Royal Army Medical Corps. He was well read in the theories of socialism and had practised living to a Tolstoyian philosophy with others. He was significantly older than many of those who volunteered in 1915 and was courting his love relatively late for the times.

His family, and particularly his mother are extremely close to his heart. But as we will see, he can be indecisive, forgetful, and perhaps so concerned with the big philosophies of life that the basics get a little lost. For a socialist or Christian anarchist he also seems to have a surprising reverence for the officers he serves with. The letters can also sometimes surprise with a glimpse into his wider skill set:

That night, Tuesday, Major Thompson came and worked with us (on bringing in the French harvest). He sometimes reminds me of Harold. He was humorously surprised at finding that there were quite a number of little things to be learnt even in such a simple operation !

I told him I wanted to take a letter to the other camp to post it before bedtime, and as he had something to send as well, he asked me if I would ride over. So I agreed and got into a pair of riding breeches and set off – not, I may say, entirely at my ease !

However I had not gone far before I met one of our men coming from there by bicycle and as he was returning I handed my letters over to him. Not to be done out of my ride, though, I turned off the main road and made my way to some fields of stubble where I was able to have some trotting and cantering all to myself and succeeded in getting into a very lively perspiration before I had done ! 16/08/18 (196)

A “skilled” horseman as well !

(* (Added by Hilda) “I’ve re-read this letter June 29th 1969! at Upton Grange, Macclesfield, a sunny summer’s day in my bed sitting room – 2.30 pm with window wide open. Hilda.”)

As a fellow RAMC man wrote after the War - *“I believed then, as I still do, that there was no possible justification for killing, but I had no objection to saving lives.”* (George Wells RAMC orderly – The Manchester Regiment.)

Perhaps these words capture best how Lionel too developed his decision to volunteer and act as a servant to his fellow man at a time when duty against military aggression in Europe and for home and country were being so heavily promoted.