

REPORTING ON THE WEST FRONT

CANADA, with thousands of her men in the firing line, has no one to chronicle their adventures. If a convention of

Eastern Ontario dairymen discusses the merits of alfalfa, at Picton—if a handful of paper-hangers meet at the Labour Temple to pass a resolution against the use of green wall-paper—if Lord Shaughnessy eats a fried egg in his car on a siding at Moose Jaw, or a Japanese fisherman comes into the fish docks at Vancouver with a tale of a sea-serpent in the Gulf of Georgia—reporters are sent by the leading papers within a considerable distance of these hallowed spots. One man is killed and a handful injured by a railway locomotive in Toronto Union Depot—and three men from each of the three Toronto morning papers are sent out to report the event. Yet the greatest adventure on which Canadians have ever embarked—goes on unseen and unsung so far as Canadian recorders are concerned. Not a house in Canada but has its own direct interest in the war. Not a man, not a woman but is knitting socks, or writing letters, or giving money, or saying prayers—and with all our men at the Front there is not one whose professional business it is to write about them as only a Canadian, knowing them and knowing Canada, could write about them. This may, of course, be a perfectly satisfactory condition of affairs to the Canadian public, but on the surface it looks somehow wrong. Even the official Canadian eye-witness (who was a Canadian by birth and fortune, but in nothing else) has ceased to exist. The London correspondent of the Canadian Associated Press (a mighty good fellow and a most competent and conscientious journalist) is an Englishman who has never been in Canada. Several Canadian newspapermen have been allowed to take rooms and eat their meals in London—among them Douglas Robertson, of the Toronto Telegram; Roland Hill, of the Montreal Star, and (until recently) Walter Willison, of the Toronto News. Except for a few personally conducted tours to the Front (and the first of these did not take place until the war was over a year old and a dozen other Canadian newspapermen had returned to Canada convinced that they would never reach the Front) these three men had to be content with supplementing the Canadian Associated Press man's work with London hotel gossip and bar-parlour stories of the Front. More than once important statements for overseas consumption (such as that of Lloyd George to the Australian A. P. man recently) have been issued through interviews to overseas newspaper representatives—but seldom to a Canadian press representative.

When the first Canadian newspaper party was taken to the front in September, 1915,* they had the pleasure of meeting the actual field correspondents of almost every kind of paper under the sun—except a Canadian paper. There were Englishmen and Americans, a Russian, a Swiss, a Norwegian, a Hollander, an Australian—but not a Canadian. Sir Max Aitken, it is true, was the official Eye Witness and lived many miles behind the Front, but always in close touch with actual field operations by means of his ubiquitous Rolls-Royce. But Sir Max was an official working with all the limitations of official responsibility. Now that he has left the service and entered the House of Lords as Baron Beaverbrook, Canada is without a professional chronicler at the Front.

Of course no one could say for certain that we should have been any better off for having a real Canadian press man with our armies at the Front. War has a strange effect on writing men. It has "made" some, such as Philip Gibbs and Ian Hamilton. It has produced men like "The Sunny Subaltern," who wrote "Billy's Letters from Flanders," a little book that should be in every Canadian house. On the other hand, it has dampened the spirit of many a redoubtable writer who came to

Canada Alone Has No Pressmen with Her Armies— Their Adventures Chronicled by Strangers

By BRITTON B. COOKE

scribble—and remained to be awed into silence. Canadians, particularly Ontario Canadians, will remember the name of Hal Gordon, of the staff of the Toronto Daily Star. Gordon was a peculiarly able writer, a man of sympathy and insight, coupled with good judgment and a very level head. He wrote in a charming, clear and attractive style. When the war broke out he was appointed to represent the Star at the Front. When it became known that no newspapermen were to be allowed to accompany the Canadian troops, Gordon enlisted with his old regiment, the Queen's Own. From Valcartier and from various points in England he sent splendid letters home to the Star. They WERE Canadian. He even succeeded in sending some letters from France until he was instructed that this was contrary

on the sleeve of his muddy tunic.

One of the first remarks Gordon made after the first greetings had passed, was this:

"Well. Didn't I tell you there's nothing to write about?"

"Nothing?"

"You surely don't think there's any copy around here, do you?" he asked.

I DIFFERED with him. The thing was absorbingly interesting. At first I thought he was ironical, but in this I was wrong. Having seen so many terrible and wonderful sights, the mind of this gallant soldier and brilliant writer, had reached the quite natural conclusion that there was nothing here to write about except things too sacred to be dealt with in words for the unknowing public—or things which only poets could translate to paper. That, after many months of war, was the attitude of perhaps the ablest of young Canadian newspaper writers. Gordon had seen his tent-mates of Valcartier and Salisbury Plains, killed at his side while wielding spades, or lifting food to their mouths. Others had been taken prisoner. Others were missing as splendid "Gordy" himself has now been missing.

The night after meeting Gordon in the trenches again, Roland Hill and I had the pleasure of spending an evening with the English and American correspondents in their quarters just outside the town of —, where British Headquarters at that time lay. From the queer little inn where we had been quartered, we motored out through the night shadowed roads to an old house that must once have sheltered the lord and master of many acres hereabouts. A high stone wall rose sheer from the edge of the white road, cutting off the garden from the view of passers-by. The wall must have been fifteen feet high and was broken in two places where the tall gates swung open to our car. At the corners of the wall beside the gates were stone urns containing the roots of vines that trailed gracefully down over the stone-work. Within the gates we could observe only a tangle of dried flower-stalks (it was September). At the far side of the crescent drive was the door of the house.

Here, in conversation with a number of correspondents, one could obtain additional information regarding the point of view of the correspondent. A number of the men were playing cards round a lamp in the dining-room of the old house. Underfoot one felt oil-cloth, patched and treacherous in places. In the air was the mingled odour of lamp-smoke, wood-fires and kitchen cookery. Even the cigarettes of the correspondents could not drown that homely combination of smells. Gibbs, who was a friend of Hill, was upstairs, we were told, going to bed for some unearthly reason or other. A message sent to Gibbs brought us an invitation to ascend the gleaming old stair-case to

Gibbs' personal quarters. He hadn't felt like cards, so had chosen sleep as the only refuge from ennui—and that at the Front, thought Hill and I. Gibbs, however, seemed now content to forego sleep for the interesting spectacle of a couple of Canadian newspaper men who were still excited from the very scenes which to Gibbs and the other resident correspondents were woefully dull.

WHETHER it was Gibbs or one of the other men in the party in the dining-room, who told us what follows, I cannot now remember. Here, in the intervals of the card-playing, we talked about the feelings of a correspondent at the Front.

In effect, the opinion given was this:

"I remember," he said, "when the death of say fifty people in some sort of catastrophe was considered about as big a 'story' as a newspaper man could be asked to work on. When the Titanic went down it looked as though the most heart-rending story the world had ever heard was to be written. When the Empress of Ireland sank in the St. Lawrence (Concluded on page 24.)



"Whether it was Philip Gibbs—I cannot now remember."

to the rules governing a private soldier. If anyone doubts that a Canadian correspondent in France could write more interestingly for Canadian readers, and do better justice to the Canadian fighting man than the English and American writers upon whom Canada has been forced to depend, he needs only to refer to some of Gordon's letters. They were the sort of thing we should have had and should still be getting.

But to illustrate the effect of the war upon the mind of a writer, I may perhaps repeat in effect a conversation I had with Hal Gordon in a front line firing trench just across from Malines. Together with an official guide, Robertson, of the Toronto Telegram, and I, had just come 'round the corner of one of the "bays in the front line trench"—when we saw Gordon ahead of us. He had been with the third battalion through the series of terrible battles that practically wiped the original battalion out of existence. He had been through the battle of St. Julien, and through Givenchy—all those fights. He had won his way from private, to corporal, to sergeant—and now to a commission; a lieutenant's "Pips" were

* The writer was the representative of the Toronto Globe and the New York Times on that occasion.