

GOWER REMEMBERS

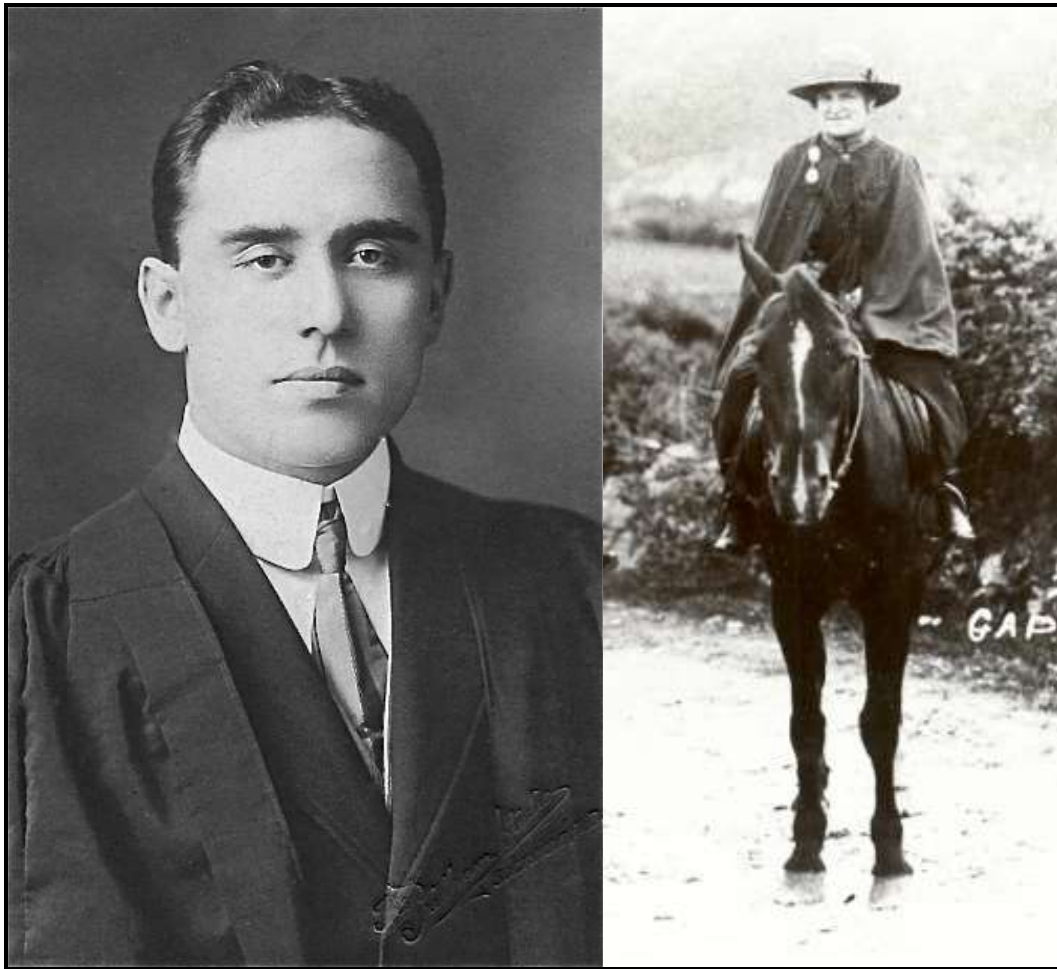
Lance Corporal William Robert Butler

(1883-1949)

and

Gertrude Emily English

(1885-1973)



A sturdy looking young man. Complains of pains and swelling of right leg. Cannot do any long marching or carry any weight on account of this. Leg was operated on for Varicose veins in Charlottetown in Dec. 1915. Exam shows numerous scars of all the veins below the knee on right leg.
(Proceedings of Medical Board at Discharge Depot, August 1, 1917,
for Lance Corporal W. R. Butler)

William Robert Butler was born in Channel, Newfoundland, on March 4, 1883, the third son and fifth of nine children of Zipporah Snow and John Thomas Butler. His mother was originally from Bay Roberts, while his father, a member of the Newfoundland Constabulary, hailed from Clarke's Beach. He was stationed in a number of Newfoundland communities during his years of service with the police force. This accounts for William and his siblings living at Channel, Woody Point in Bonne Bay, and Old Perlican before eventually settling in St. John's, which probably occurred shortly before or just after John Thomas's death in 1899 at age 54.

William received his early education in the various communities in which his father was posted. It is uncertain when he first entered the workforce, although family history has him working as a cobbler while the family resided on Lime Street; MacAlpine's St. John's Directory (1904) lists him as a shoemaker, living with his mother at 3 Bulley Street. He was later employed as a bookbinder with Dicks and Company, where his skills as a cobbler would likely have been deemed transferrable.

While there is no indication when William first entertained the idea of entering the Methodist ministry, it is safe to say that he had probably given it a lot of thought before embarking on a period as a supply minister, serving congregations in Herring Neck in Notre Dame Bay and Salt Pond

(Burin) beginning in 1910. During 1912-1913, he was a probationer in Paquet, White Bay, where he was responsible for the conduct of services under the supervision of Rev. Francis H. Phillipson in nearby Nipper's Harbour.

Following the completion of this probationary period, Butler entered Mount Allison University in 1913, as a Conference Student in Theology from the Newfoundland Conference. Having been officially sponsored for the ministry by the Newfoundland Conference meant that his tuition was covered by the Conference.

Butler spent two and one-half years at Mount Allison. In late 1915, he received permission to delay his studies in order to partake in the war effort. His initial attempt to enlist met with failure as he was declared unfit on medical grounds ("Varicose Veins in leg") following an examination held in Charlottetown, PEI, on November 30, 1915. Determined to do his part, he underwent surgery in December, after which the medical officer, Captain J. W. Dorsey, gave his okay for Butler to enlist. He did so on February 2, 1916, joining the 105th Highlanders Overseas Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force in Charlottetown.

According to his Attestation Paper, Butler was 5 feet, 4½ inches tall, weighed 145 pounds, with a dark complexion, grey eyes and dark hair. On that form he is identified as Presbyterian, and, according to family history, he and his mother, and presumably other family members, attended St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church (the Kirk) in St. John's while living there. Yet, he was training to be a Methodist minister.

Butler went overseas with his battalion on the *Empress of Britain*, leaving Halifax on July 15, 1916, and arriving in Liverpool, England some ten days later. He spent the five months that followed at the Canadian Camp at Dibgate, Shorncliffe, near Calais on the southeast coast of

England, before moving to another such camp at Witley in Surrey, where he remained until late January 1917. While at Dibgate, on September 24, 1916, he had been promoted to Lance Corporal.

His right leg appears to have caused Butler continued and debilitating pain; as a result, he was assigned to the Canadian Casualty Assembly Centre (CCAC) at Hastings. The CCAC was responsible, among other duties, for assessing Canadian soldiers who were in England because of injuries received to determine whether they needed additional medical treatment or were fit to return to their regiments.

Butler spent most of his remaining time in active service with the CCAC or with similar units. On August 17, 1917, he was taken on strength with the Canadian Discharge Depot at Buxton; nine days later he left England for Halifax, where he was assigned special case status and received a discharge from the CEF on October 20, 1917. His involvement with the CCAC tempted Butler to change his program of study from theology to medicine, but he decided to stay the course. He returned to Mount Allison shortly thereafter to continue his studies, receiving a Certificate in Theology the following year. Because of his war service, he received a bye in Greek in his final year.

Following his graduation from Mount Allison, Butler was assigned to the Bell Island and Portugal Cove Pastoral Charge, where he remained until 1920. That year was a momentous one in his life, as it was the year he was ordained into the Methodist ministry and the year he married Gertrude Emily English.

We are glad to hear of the safe arrival of Miss Gertrude English, who left with the Harvard Unit of Red Cross Nurses and Surgeons for duty in France. (The Evening Telegram, January 5, 1917)

Gertrude Emily English was born on January 14, 1885, the seventh of eleven children born to Martha Atwill and William Robert English. Of these eleven children, nine were girls; the two boys were Jessie Allan, who was born two years before Gertrude, and Robert Chauncey, who was born two years after she was. Jessie died two days before Robert was born. Gertrude's father operated a very successful watchmaking and jewelry business on Water Street. The family resided on the outskirts of the city, in the Freshwater Valley, near the location of the former city bus depot, in a house known both as "English's cottage" and "the English Cottage".

Undoubtedly Gertrude received a good education, as her later success in life was dependent on being formally trained in reading, writing and arithmetic. Her working life appears to have begun sometime after the turn of the century: she does not appear in McAlpine's St. John's Directory (1904), but does appear in the directory for 1908 as a clerk at Dicks and Company, where William Butler was then working as a bookbinder.

In August 1910, English, together with her younger sister Frederica, travelled to Battle Creek, Michigan, where their eldest sister, Bertha English Chauncey, was living. While there in 1911, Gertrude enrolled in the Battle Creek Sanatorium and Hospital Training School for Nurses. She completed the program of study in three years, graduating as a nurse on August 11, 1914, one week after Great Britain declared war on Germany.

Following her graduation English spent some time in Battle Creek, and was present for the birth of her sister Bertha's son, Paul, in 1914.

However, she left there for Brookline, Massachusetts, where she did post graduate work in nursing at Corey Hill Hospital. While in Massachusetts, she assisted in the birth of another nephew, Earl Clark, son of her sister Eliza, who lived in Mattapoisett.

It is uncertain why or when English decided to join the Harvard Unit of Red Cross Nurses and Surgeons for service in the war. According to reports in the St. John's newspapers *The Evening Telegram* and *The Daily Star* she was in Europe in late December 1916 or early January 1917. This was several months before the United States formally entered the war, which it did on April 6, 1917.

English served in the British Expeditionary Force's Number 22 General Hospital at Dannes-Camiers, near Etaples, France, for approximately two years. During that time she and another nurse, Margaret Mulock of Upper Le Have, Nova Scotia, formed a very close friendship that lasted through the war and beyond. Often referred to as the "Heavenly Twins", they took several furloughs together, including one to London, where they had tea with Dr. William Osler at his residence overlooking the River Thames, and another to Ireland, which involved visits to Dunloe and Killarney. The image of English reproduced on page one was taken in Dunloe.

All was not 'heavenly' for English and her nursing comrades, however. Almost every day they were faced with incoming wounded. They had to work very long hours under the most trying conditions. It could not have been easy to know that a young man was about to die from his wounds or from some illness; to hear him cry out in agony and know there was nothing more that could be done to ease his pain; to hear him call for his mother with his dying breath. As well, the casualty hospitals were often not far from the front lines and were sometimes hit by shell fire or bombs. Number 22 General Hospital was shelled by the enemy in the

Spring of 1918, with one ward destroyed and severe damage to several others. The wounded were removed from the wards for a period of time, but returned once necessary repairs had been carried out.

English's thoughts about what life was like in Number 22 General Hospital were poignantly captured in a poem she wrote that was published in the December 1917 issue of *The Newfoundland Quarterly*. Entitled "Ships that Pass in the Night" it is reproduced here in its entirety.

Ships that Pass in the Night

The scene – a soldier's hospital,
Where wounded, sick and sad,
Are carried in on stretchers,
And we aim to make them glad.
That despite the pain and suffering
They've been destined to endure,
They can yet be happy and grateful
From the M. O's efforts to cure.

They come to us bloody and dirty,
With faces of suffering and woe,
But we clean off the traces of battle,
The dirt and the mud must go.
While dressing their wounds we
tease them,
To make them forget their pain,
For we know full well we hurt them,
But remember 'tis for their gain.

The "Sisters" sometimes would gladly
Take all of the hurts instead.
But we know our duty and do it,
Though our hearts oftimes have bled.

So we try to make up to the laddies
By word and deed and look,
For the bravery that never
can be printed,
No matter how big the book.

The first thing they ask in the morning
Is "Sister, what do you think?
Shall I get over to Blighty?"
And we almost see their hearts sink,
If we shake our heads or look doubtful,
For England so fair and so fine
Is "Home, sweet Home" or "Blighty,"
To all who come down from the Line.

And think you the boys are more happy
Than the Sister, who smiles and says
"Yes, lad, you'll get over to Blighty
In a week or perhaps a few days."
So they keep going and coming,
And over and over again,
Our wards are filled with new faces, -
Some handsome, some sad, some plain.

Over and over they write us,
And tell how happy they are,
But though they are now in “Blighty,”
They couldn’t have better care,
Than they had when we dressed and
teased them,
And hope if they fall again,
That fate will kindly lead them
To the same old hospital train.
Now a word of the few, yet many
Who are more unfortunate than
they think,
Because they don’t get over
to “Blighty,”

Yet bravely their “medicine” drink.
When the C. O. detains them for duty,
And up the line they must go,
But they smile and chatter gaily,
To hide their feelings, I know.

So back again to the trenches,
In the course of time they must go.
With tired feet and backs that ache,
They march forth to face the foe.
Surely God will watch o’er them,
And whether they fall or return,
Will give to each man for his service,
A reward for the deeds he has done.

Number 22 General Hospital closed on January 7, 1919. English was there until the end. She and her nursing colleagues were removed to other locations, the final one being London. From there, she and Margaret Mulock travelled to Malta for a long overdue vacation before returning to the United States in March. She left the U.S. sometime during the months that followed, probably to return to Newfoundland. In September of 1919, she was back in the U.S., however, to visit her sister Maud Turner in Boston. That trip was on board the SS *Rosalind* and took her from St. John’s to Halifax to Boston. While in Halifax on September 22, she had to fill a U.S. Government form, as Boston was her final destination. It indicated that she was 5 feet, 4 inches tall, weighed 110 pounds and had a fair complexion with auburn hair and blue eyes.



Her stay in Boston did not last long; she was soon back in St. John's, where, on July 7, 1920, she married William Robert Butler at her residence at 28 Dick's Square, with the Rev. Mark Fenwick of Gower Street Methodist Church officiating. Not long after their marriage Butler was assigned to the pastoral charge of Change Islands, where he spent the next two years. His subsequent pastoral changes were Musgrave Harbour (1922-1926), Musgravetown (1926-1932), Hant's Harbour (1932-1934), Old Perlican (1934-1938), Burin (1938-1942), Freshwater, Carbonear (1942-1946) and Twillingate (1946-1949).

For Gertrude, the move to Change Islands marked the first time she had lived in outport Newfoundland. It was where she would spend the next 29 years of her life. As a married woman, she was not expected to continue nursing, at least not in a professional capacity. That did not prevent the locals from turning to her for advice and assistance in medical matters once they learned she had nursing experience. For many of the communities in which she lived she was the only trained medical person for miles around.

As the minister's wife, she was also expected to take a leading role in church activities. She served as Superintendent of the Sunday School in each of the communities in which she lived. It is safe to assume that she also held office in the local branches of such church organizations as the Women's Association (WA) and the Women's Missionary Society (WMS), as well as the Newfoundland Girls in Training (NGIT).

She was also a mother, having given birth to four children in the first seven years of their marriage: Dorothy Elizabeth (1921); Margaret Mulock (1923); William Robert English (1924) and Reginald Hearder (1927).

Even being a mother had its medical challenges. It is recorded that their youngest son was impaled in the throat with a stick that he fell on and Gertrude had to get it out and treat the wound. That son is still alive and is a retired medical doctor in Corner Brook.

William Robert Butler died while ministering in Twillingate on March 27, 1949 at the age of 66. He is buried in the Southside United Church Cemetery in that community. He was a very fit man who often was entrusted with multi-point charges, which he visited regularly to conduct services. If transportation was not readily available he sometimes walked great distances to visit members of his flock. He was an avid trout fisherman and partridge hunter and was keenly interested in vegetable gardening.

After her husband's death, Gertrude Butler returned to St. John's where she lived first with her youngest sister, Effie, on LeMarchant Road. She later resided on Park Avenue in Mount Pearl before moving back to St. John's in 1967 to live with her daughter, Margaret Hollett. She spent the last two years of her life in the Agnes Pratt Home, where Margaret was administrator. She died at the Grace Hospital on September 29, 1973 at the age of 88, and was buried in the General Protestant Cemetery in St. John's on October 1. The funeral service was conducted by Rev. Dr. A. E. Kewley of Gower Street United Church.

Both William and Gertrude Butler lived lives dedicated to people in need. In both time of war and in time of peace they put others above themselves, as they endured difficult challenges to serve their communities. Those communities spanned both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, in wartorn Europe, and in outport Newfoundland, but to them the place was incidental; it was the people who mattered.

Note: William Butler's brother, Jesse, also a member of the Gower Street congregation, served in the Irish Guards in World War I. His story will be told in a future issue of Gower Remembers.

On Sunday, November 16, 2014, Gower Street United Church initiated a program of commemoration that will last for approximately the next four years. On roughly every second Sunday from now through to the end of 2018, a brief write-up on one of these individuals, similar to this one, will appear as an insert in the Bulletin and there will be a reference to that person in the service. In this way we hope to recognize their contribution to the war effort, the many sacrifices they made, some with their very lives, and the debt of gratitude we owe to each of them.

We also hope to learn more about them from their descendants or other relatives, thereby fostering a link between our past and our present as we begin our 201st year as a faith community.

If you know of any relatives of these servicemen and woman please contact Bert Riggs at briggs@mun.ca or at 726-6169.