## 3. R. Hotter

Hi there! My name is Alex Gaudet and I am one of the students class to have had the chance to mount a display pertaining to World War I and the Valley. My display is titled *Warring Beauty* and it is about a young war poet named Bernard Freeman Trotter.



Bernard Freeman Trotter was born in Toronto, Ontario, but he lived most of his childhood along the dykes in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, as his father was employed by Acadia University (he was president here for a time at the turn of the 20th century). As a child and budding teenager, he would have been surrounded by a caring, tight-knit village community and the murmur of the ocean. All of these elements, the people and the flora, greatly influenced the poetry he would write.

He enrolled as a student at Acadia University but later, when his family moved back to Ontario, enrolled as a student at McMaster University in Hamilton. For a time, however, the Trotter family moved to California, and this radical change in climate dramatically helped in regards to Bernard's frail health. As the years passed, Bernard grew stronger, and when the family moved back to Canada in 1910 he was able to enroll at McMaster University in the hopes of obtaining an English degree in 5 years' time. During his senior year, the war broke out. His health, although improved, was still not good enough for active service. Enlisted, but firmly rooted on Canadian soil, Bernard penned his frustrations to paper and in spirit followed his comrades overseas. It was not until the university itself put out a call for men to join the army that he was finally accepted into active service, in 1916.

The description of Bernard's passing, I believe, is best described by McClay, a family friend who wrote the introduction to A Canadian Twilight. As McClay states:

On the night of May 7th he had just unloaded his sixth and last load under heavy shell fire and had commended his men for their good work when a high explosive shell burst quite close to him, killing him instantly. He fell from his horse, and "when they went to him where he lay dead," wrote a fellow lieutenant, "they found his face perfectly calm, with a suspicion of a smile on the lips."

And so Bernard passed away, at the young age of 26, just shy of his twenty seventh birthday.

His father, upon news of his son's passing, decided to collect some of Bernard's best poems and publish them. The final product is a small collection of poems titled A Canadian Twilight and Other Poems of War and of Peace. The book is divided into several sections, including poems from his childhood as well as poems of the war, but one theme remains evident throughout: nature and his own emotive states are central to his poetry. Bernard was an avid lover of nature and expressed through his pen the beauty and peace he found within the natural world. Similarly, poetry was an emotive outlet for him, enabling him to voice his thoughts on the war (both his inability to enlist as an active member in the beginning, and afterwards as a soldier on the frontlines) and its toll in human sacrifice. Bernard believed it was just war, fought for a just cause, and these beliefs are reflected in several of his poems.

I only chose four poems out of the lot for my display, mainly because I did not want there to be too much text, and also because I found that the poems I chose best represented this chronological journey through Bernard's life that I was trying to emulate. The poems I chose are the following: *My Dad An' I, Blomidon, The Passing*, and "*Ici Repose*". I will explain why I chose these poems and their significance.

We go afishin' in the spring, An' tho' we oft get nary thing, We're each as happy as a king, My dad an' I.

We go agunnin', too, for game, An' tho' we don't attain to fame, We like it first rate just the same, My dad an' I.

The first poem I chose was *My Dad An' I*. I chose this poem because I thought it accurately encapsulated Bernard's

childhood and also demonstrated the bond that linked both father and son, possibly hinting as to why Bernard's father hastily compiled a collection of poems in his son's memory shortly after his passing. It is a short poem, but a very sweet one.

The second poem is *Blomidon*, for many of the same reasons, only this poem directly links Bernard's childhood and adolescence with Wolfville and the Valley. Indeed, this poem about Blomidon is laced with nature related imagery – the churning of the waves, the dense fog, and the strong winds – and is in some ways representative of the tensions and unease, much like stormy seas, that would make their way into Canada as the war loomed nearer.

Thirdly, I chose the poem *The Passing*, because Bernard presents many of his views on the war and the 'ultimate sacrifice' he felt called upon to present but could not put forward because of his health. Bernard's frustration with his inability to go to the front is evident, as is the respect and veneration he had for soldiers who were themselves fighting overseas. Bernard accurately captures the sentiments many young men, by 1914-15, would have felt in regards to the battles unfurling in Europe, but were incapable to partake for whatever reason.

Calm glory on the cloud-piled dome of heaven; Glory of fire on the great sun's face. So slips my soul, scarce heeding of the change, From glory unto glory: Heaven breaks— Eternal glory on the face of God!

Lastly, I chose Bernard's most well-known piece of literature, his poem *Ici Repose*. This poem he wrote on the frontlines and explores the plight of soldiers and their ultimate duty, that of protecting their country and upholding its values. About halfway through the poem, the speaker changes – it becomes a "we," an inclusive entity through which Bernard upholds the importance of each individual soldier and the noble nature of their fight, despite the fact that death looms nearby. Indeed, this was the last poem that Bernard Trotter was to write – the

## manuscript would reach his parents the day after he was killed.



Ultimately, why did I choose to make a display about Bernard Trotter? For one, war poetry is a highly relevant primary source in terms of historical material, seeing as it provides a wealth of information to any historian and researcher who considers them. It is an 'inside look' into the lives of men on the frontlines, especially during a war as bloody and devastating as the First World War, that proves to be integral in achieving an overall understanding of the lives of the men who fought - their thoughts, their struggles and the various anecdotes they recorded in their prose. I sought to create a display that would engage my audience emotively, resonate within them, strike a chord. I believed war poetry would enable me to do that. Importantly, as I began my research about Bernard Trotter, I found that his life was quite interesting and seeing as I had never heard of him before, I felt that I must share his life story with more people. This project enabled me to do that on a much broader scale. If we consider that Bernard is largely remembered through his pen and paper, I believe such a display does his memory justice.

## A CANADIAN TWILIGHT AND OTHER POEMS OF WAR AND OF PEACE

As for why I opted to mount my display in such a manner, I wanted it done in such a manner for two main reasons, the first being that I wanted to avoid a static, text-heavy display. I wanted it to be engaging, captivating and oblige my viewers to take pause and reflect upon the content they were gazing at. Therefore, I decided to recreate Bernard's passing, only through another angle – the amalgam of destroyed furniture is an echo of the shell burst that claimed his life on French soil, however the furniture itself (broken chairs, picture frames and cases) is very homely, and symbolic of how Bernard's passing would have, much in the same way, shattered and uprooted his family and friends' lives once they learned of his untimely death.

In conclusion, this project can easily surmised in the title I chose: *Warring Beauty*. I hoped to demonstrate that even in the ugliest of spaces, there can be beauty. Beauty in a life well lived and beauty in poetic expression. A quick glance at Bernard's life is telling of a man who lived simply but fully, and served his country as best as he could, proud in the knowledge of the sacrifice he was making.

## **Bernard Freeman Trotter**



**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** Most of my information was gathered and reprinted with permission from the Esther Clark Wright Archives. I consulted one of the first editions of *A Canadian Twilight: And other poems of War and of Peace* (1917), where some of the biographical material and all of the poems were gathered. For further biographical information, I consulted McMaster University's Archives, which had included Bernard Freeman Trotter on a website page about their WWI soldiers, all of which were in the public domain.

*Website*: <a href="http://pw20c.mcmaster.ca/case-study/mcmaster-university-s-own-soldier-poet-bernard-trotter">http://pw20c.mcmaster.ca/case-study/mcmaster-university-s-own-soldier-poet-bernard-trotter</a>