



INTRODUCTION

Organisers of commemorations of wars are always very keen on the word “we” and “our” – they talk a lot about “our Armed Forces”, “our Country” and so on - but we all know that very often LGBTQ people and their voices get left out of the story. As a gay man, and one of the co-creators of this project, one of the great pleasures of working on it was that the basic idea of writing a letter to an unknown soldier was so simple and direct that it very easily became inclusive. For once, “everyone” really did mean everyone, and the soldier began to receive letters from LGBTQ writers straight away.

If you’re thinking of writing your own letter, or of using the website as an LGBTQ history or creative writing resource, I suggest you start by reading some letters. You can find them by clicking on the writers’ names mentioned in this text or by using the search functions of the [READ page](#).

THE LETTERS

By and large, people wrote their letters in one of three ways.

Some people chose to imagine love stories and family relationships and friendships that might (and surely must) have happened during the First World War, and to write very personally, filling in the gaps of history with their words – examples of this would be the letters by [Patrick Gale](#), [Bernardine Evaristo](#) and [Emily Duke](#). Emily, by the way, did a really interesting and bold thing – she claimed space for women’s stories by writing a letter from one female lover to another. Perhaps the soldier has got hold of that private letter somehow and is reading it – or perhaps Emily just wanted to break the rules and for once have a love-story in war-time that didn’t involve men.

Because the vast majority of letters sent home from abroad in World War One were censored, we have precious few records of what real LGBTQ people felt or went through, and it is great that we can now go back and imaginatively fill in the blanks. For me it's interesting to compare these "imaginary history" letters – vivid, punchy, personal – with some of the better-known "queer" writing from the First World War – by Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, for instance, where everything is much more under wraps. If you want to be inspired by some more examples of people going back into history and imagining what love and life must have been like, then go on, treat yourself – just browse through the website, or look at some letters by brilliant straight writers like [Caryl Churchill](#), [Roberta Taylor](#) and [Martin Daws](#) – and then get writing *our* stories !

Some people chose to write very consciously from *now*, looking back across the hundred years that separates us from 1914-18 – examples of this would be the very different letters by [Bette Bourne](#), [Alan Hollinghurst](#), and I suppose my own letter to the soldier too – [Neil Bartlett](#). My letter is dedicated to my Grandfather, Fred, who was gassed in 1916 in France. Family connections are another way of starting to think about your letter- go back two or three generations, and almost everyone is directly connected to the First World War. I had a great-aunts, for instance, who lost her fiancée in the war, and then lived with a female "friend" for the next sixty years.....

Some people chose to express their queer perspective on things by not talking about queerness directly, but by telling other stories of being a minority or a dissenter in the context of war – examples of this would be the letters by [Stephen Fry](#), [Bryony Lavery](#), [Jackie Kay](#), [Stella Duffy](#) and trans writer [Jo Clifford](#) – be sure to look at [Jo's clip](#) of herself reading her letter, it's fantastic.

All of those three ways of responding to the idea of writing to the soldier are valid; all of them are powerful. One great way of starting to answer the question of "How shall I write?" is, in my experience, to start with the very first word. Is it "Dear"- or "Darling" or is it somebody's name? And the second word – if the first word is "Dear", again, what is the second word? A name? "Husband", "Son", "Neighbour", Lieutenant – or "Soldier", or "Statue"you decide. Once you've started, the rest of the letter will follow on from that choice...

By the way, as you're looking at the website, it's interesting to note that all of the photographs of the statue on the website are by a gay man. I think Dom Agius's queer eye for the masculine beauty and masculine pathos of the statue made a very powerful contribution to the website.

Our LGBTQ voices are *absolutely* part of this country's story, whether in peace or war, and I'm proud of the fact that this project included them. And I hope it will inspire some more.

Neil Bartlett

You can find out more about Neil's other work, and contact him, at www.neil-bartlett.com

If you are part of a group, a teacher or youth leader you might want to use this LGBTQ perspective as a starting point and use some of the suggestions from the Learning Resources, also in this section of the website, to encourage your group to create their own project using LETTER TO AN UNKNOWN SOLDIER as a guide and stimulus.