

TRANSCRIBED AND EDITED BY BARRY WAUGH

# LETTERS FROM THE FRONT

Missy-sur-Aisne,  
par M. le Major de Cantonment.

J. GRESHAM  
MACHEN'S  
CORRESPONDENCE  
FROM  
WORLD WAR I





For students of Presbyterian history, Machen is always a stop along the timeline. We consider his scholarly role and applaud his supernaturalism. It is even commonly known of his international travels to study under men like Hermann. Now we have access to the humanitarian Machen. In the context of the Great War, these personal letters open up a new side of him. From his own pen, often in the midst of uncertainties, we are able to know him better. I can't commend this book too much.

—**C. N. Willborn**, Pastor of Covenant Presbyterian Church, Oak Ridge, Tennessee; Adjunct Professor of Historical Theology, Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary

What a treat Barry Waugh has provided for those who love Machen! J. Gresham Machen with the YMCA reveals Machen the perfectionist, the theologian, the servant, and the son. But, these letters to his family also reveal the changed man, having seen firsthand the horrors of war.

—**Danny E. Olinger**, General Secretary, Committee on Christian Education, Orthodox Presbyterian Church; Editor of *A Geerhardus Vos Anthology*

Doughboy accounts of their experiences in World War I are fairly common, but it is unusual to find the stories of those who offered assistance behind the trenches. J. Gresham Machen served in the YMCA in France for over a year and was always near the frontline. Whether helping the wounded or working in the canteen, he ministered to the men as best he could. Machen's letters reveal the frustrations and boredom that so many soldiers felt as well as the joys of serving those in need. Machen's compassion is truly amazing, and his letters home offer a wonderful glimpse of the service of one YMCA official. The editor, Dr. Barry Waugh, deserves commendation as well. His commentary and footnotes provide essential guidance for fully understanding Machen's service and ministry during the war.

—**David Snead**, Chair, Department of History, Liberty University; Editor of *George Browne: An American Soldier in World War I*

J. Gresham Machen is a fascinating, complex, and controversial figure, well known for his role in the church conflicts of the 1920s and '30s. What is often forgotten is that he was also a member of the generation of young men whose lives were forever changed by their exposure to the horrors of trench warfare in the First World War. This volume contains the letters which the young Machen wrote home as he served as a YMCA volunteer in the war. As such, they offer both important first-hand accounts of the conflict but also give us insights into some of the darker experiences which shaped the mind of the future church leader.

—**Carl R. Trueman**, Paul Woolley Professor of Church History,  
Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia

J. Gresham Machen played a key role in the theological debates of the 1920s and 1930s. His work has been studied and evaluated from many angles. What is less well-known and less well considered is his service in the First World War. Although he objected to American involvement, he participated as a volunteer in the YMCA. From these rare letters the reader can see a fresh side of the great scholar. On the battlefields of France he was simply known as a compassionate soul who brought solace to scores of suffering soldiers. For those who only know Machen the polemicist, this volume will showcase Machen the caregiver.

—**William Edgar**, Professor of Apologetics, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia

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**THE FRONT**



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FROM WORLD WAR I*

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BY BARRY WAUGH



PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

**R&R**  
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# FOREWORD

THE NAME OF J. GRESHAM MACHEN is synonymous with high theological scholarship, unswerving biblical fidelity, and theological orthodoxy. His outspoken defense of historic Christianity has had a substantial impact on students, pastors, and scholars. Christians in the Machen tradition have even been called “Machen’s warrior children.”

So it may be a surprise that in the First World War Machen chose not to fight as a warrior. Instead he regularly risked his life in embattled France as a humanitarian non-combatant serving with the YMCA. The confrontational theologian of Christianity and Liberalism had previously been an agent of grace and compassion in the midst of danger and death in the Great War. This volume rounds out our understanding of Machen the brilliant scholar by also revealing him as a servant of Christ to needy and suffering soldiers.

Moreover, January 1, 2012 was the seventy-fifth anniversary of Machen’s untimely death. Thus it is fitting that we remember his role with the Young Men’s Christian Association in preserving lives of young men in military service. This publication also celebrates Machen’s importance for the history of Westminster, as well as this largely overlooked aspect of his ministry for Christ.

It is with pleasure, then, that Westminster Seminary Press publishes Machen’s letters home from the battlefields of France. I hope in the coming years we will be able to offer other books that highlight Westminster’s heritage, and in the process, help to advance the gospel and the growth of Christ’s Kingdom.

Thanks for reading!

Sincerely in His Service,

Peter A. Lillback  
President Westminster Theological Seminary  
January 2012



# PREFACE

THIS YEAR MARKS THE SEVENTY-FIFTH memorial of the death of the founder of Westminster Theological Seminary, J. Gresham Machen, who succumbed to pneumonia, January 1, 1937, and it is the bicentennial of the founding of American Presbyterian seminary education at Princeton, New Jersey. It is fitting that these two landmark remembrances occur this year given Dr. Machen's leaving Princeton Seminary to found Westminster Theological Seminary. His reputation as a New Testament scholar, theological educator, and churchman are all recognized, but his involvement with the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) in the Great War is not so well known. The following collection of letters written to his family provides not only a picture of several months of his life but also a recounting of some of the horrors of the final days of what is now most often called the First World War. When the United States entered the conflict it was ill prepared for the logistics necessary to move and supply hundreds of thousands of troops overseas. President Woodrow Wilson's efforts to keep the United States out of the war and pacifist sentiments among Americans contributed to the slow process of getting troops abroad and into action. Not only was troop mobilization slow, but providing recreational activities, refreshments, toiletries, snacks, and other aspects of the soldier's life in Europe had to be mobilized. The non-military aspects of life abroad were provided by interdenominational and religious organizations such as the Salvation Army, Knights of Columbus (Roman Catholic), YMCA, and others. It is the desire of the transcriber and editor of the letters that the following collection of correspondence increases interest in the life and labors of J. Gresham Machen, the Great War, and the war work of the YMCA.

I have been aided greatly by many people, but the most important person has been my wife, Sandy, who has read the manuscript, followed

the progress of the project, and always been there to encourage me and give her opinion when asked. Our daughter, Heather, inquires regularly about the progress of this project and has encouraged my efforts. My mother and father, and Charles and Pat, have always supported my labors and the current project is no exception.

Early in the project, the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, John Muether, reviewed a draft of the transcribed letters and encouraged me regarding pursuing publication. Also, my pastor, Rick Phillips, commented helpfully on some of the letters in the early days of the transcription process. Laurie Thomas of Mitchell Road Christian Academy read some of the letters to her middle school classes and confirmed my hope that the correspondence would appeal even to children. Most recently, C. N. “Nick” Willborn and Danny Olinger have reviewed the manuscript, and I appreciate the help provided by both of them. I am also grateful for the review of the manuscript by David Snead, Professor and Chair, Department of History, Liberty University, whose expertise in the Great War provided unique insights.

With respect to the French language and culture I must thank Westminster Theological Seminary’s resident Francophile, Bill Edgar, for helping me with some French translating and explaining some aspects of French culture. Special thanks go to Kristi Wetzel of France by Design, LLC, for her translation of the Montí letters and advising me regarding translations of other French passages.

I have been helped greatly by several other people at the seminary. The manuscript letters have been lovingly guarded for many years by the archivist, Grace Mullen. It seems that almost anything I write requires her assistance with resources in her care. Once again, I must thank gracious Grace for her courtesy and willingness to help with this project. Her biographical knowledge of the members of Dr. Machen’s family and friends was invaluable for the glossary. I would also like to thank President Peter Lillback for taking on the publication of the book for the seminary, Dick Dabney for aligning all the jots-and-tittles to complete the project, and Abbie Daise for her courtesy, patience, and direction of communications.

To those who helped but whose names I have forgotten goes my apology, but I am thankful for your assistance and hope that my porous memory has not diminished my appreciation for your assistance.

Finally, currently conflicts rage on many parts of the earth and in recent years the United States has seen many of its soldiers die for freedom. My final thank you goes to the many that have served and died—whether carrying weapons, serving refreshments, or driving an ambulance—to maintain freedom from oppressive regimes. Remembering J. Gresham Machen’s labors with the YMCA reminds us that war requires many behind-the-scenes workers that are often described as “non-combatants,” but it will be seen in this collection of letters that those serving behind the trench-lines also faced danger and contributed in their own way to the successful end of the Great War. As Jesus sat on the Mount of Olives teaching his disciples about the things that will take place he said, *you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet.* With great assurance, the Christian looks to the reign of righteousness ending sin, war, poverty, false teaching, and megalomania, as believers of all generations gather before the throne of God.

Barry Waugh  
March 27, 2012





# INTRODUCTION

## A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF J. GRESHAM MACHEN

John Gresham Machen was born in 1881 and raised in the family home on Monument Street in Baltimore, Maryland. His father, Arthur Webster Machen, was a respected attorney, and his mother, Mary (Minnie) Gresham, was born to a prominent family in Macon, Georgia. Gresham had two brothers, Arthur (Arly) Webster II and Thomas. Arthur followed in his father's footsteps and labored in the practice of law, but Thomas chose a more artistic and visual vocation working in architecture. The Machens were faithful members of the Franklin Street Presbyterian Church and exercised their gifts in its ministry in Baltimore.

Gresham's undergraduate degree was granted by Johns Hopkins University, 1901, where he also was a graduate student, 1901–2. He continued his education at Princeton Theological Seminary in New Jersey receiving the BD in 1905 while also studying at Princeton University where he received the MA in 1904. The hub of biblical studies in the early twentieth century was in Germany, so Gresham went there as a New Testament fellow at the Universities of Marburg and Göttingen, 1905–6. Following his studies in Germany, he returned to Princeton Seminary to be an instructor in New Testament, 1906–14, and then he was appointed Assistant Professor of New Testament Literature and Exegesis serving until his resignation in 1929. Due to the influences of theological liberalism at Princeton and the reorganization of the seminary, Machen and several other faculty members left the seminary to organize Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, which opened its educational doors in the fall of 1929. In 1936, he was the leader of those involved in founding what would become the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. J. Gresham Machen died of pneumonia in Bismarck, North Dakota, on January 1, 1937, while

on a speaking trip. He was never married. His remains are interred in the Machen family plot in Baltimore where his grave is marked with “Faithful unto Death” written in the Greek language that he studied and taught so vigorously.

Dr. Machen wrote several books including *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923), *New Testament Greek for Beginners* (1923), *What Is Faith?* (1925), and *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (1930). These titles have been published in several editions. One of the emphases of his writing was defending the supernatural nature of the Christian gospel against the anti-supernatural or naturalistic foundation of the theological liberalism of his era. After his return from France, he delivered the 1921 James Sprunt Lectures at Union Theological Seminary, Virginia, which were published that same year as *The Origin of Paul’s Religion*.

For those interested in learning more about Dr. Machen, *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir*, by Ned B. Stonehouse, a faculty colleague of his and fellow minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, provides a personal biography penned by a close friend.<sup>1</sup> Stonehouse’s pages 206–54 provide background material leading up to the war and information regarding Machen’s service in the war, which may prove helpful to set the scene for the transcribed letters that follow. *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in Modern America*, by D. G. Hart,<sup>2</sup> presents an intriguing intellectual portrait of Dr. Machen’s life. Stephen J. Nichols has written a guided tour of Dr. Machen’s life and thought for a more popular audience, which includes several photographs of him and of artifacts from the archives of Westminster Seminary. For a perspective on him as a New Testament scholar, one should read the work by Terry A. Chrisope, *Toward a Sure Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Dilemma of Biblical Criticism, 1881–1915*.

## THE MACHEN CORRESPONDENCE

If one spends some time reading through the letters of J. Gresham Machen it becomes clear that he was collecting his correspondence for the future. He organized his letters according to the way he thought;

1. Ned B. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; reprint, Willow Grove: Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2004).

2. D. G. Hart, *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in Modern America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1994).

his collection is organized chronologically but sometimes also by subject matter within the chronology. His collection of letters written to his alcoholic friend, Richard Hodges, spanned many years and all were meticulously stored just as he did his other letters. The letters he sent home during his YMCA service in the First World War are no exception. In a letter to his brother Arly, December 28, 1918, he commented, "I am enclosing the English *résumé* of *L. Aiglon* enclosed in the theatre program. Let Uncle see it if it is convenient and give it to Mother to put into the archives of my letters. I really think it is something of a gem." What Dr. Machen was concerned to have in his collection was a summary in English of Edmond Rostand's play, *The Eaglet*.<sup>3</sup> Why this bit of paper was important enough for Machen to mention it for inclusion in his correspondence is not known, but what is significant is that long before the ecclesiastical controversies of the 1920s, J. Gresham Machen was storing his correspondence for succeeding generations to read. In his January 17, 1919, letter to his mother, Dr. Machen mentioned he was delighted that she

and the members of our circle have liked the letters that I wrote. It would have given me satisfaction if, as Arly and others wanted, extracts from the letters could have been published, but the instructions that we received some time ago were so explicit that I was obliged to write on the subject as I did. I suppose the regulations would not be so strict now, and I rather think it was a Y.M.C.A. regulation only that forbade the publishing of censored letters. At any rate, no doubt it was well enough to be on the safe side.<sup>4</sup>

Now, as the centennial of the composition of the Machen war correspondence approaches, the interests of Arly and the other family members regarding their publication are being fulfilled. The narrative provided by the nearly 100,000 words of text is at times intense, in other places there is great sadness, while at other points his New

3. This item was not found in the Machen collection.

4. The editor wishes to comment that these letters have been transcribed as Dr. Machen wrote them; the only corrections made are those deemed necessary to clarify the intent of what he wrote. The reader is reminded that many of the war letters were written in difficult situations and in a hurry.

Testament interests take the stage, in some correspondence his concern for the soldiers' spiritual welfare shows his intense desire that the supernatural gospel be brought to them, and as in any letters, there are bits and pieces of the family life of Machen that are mundane and routine. This letter collection provides an additional perspective on the life of a man who is known as a New Testament scholar, churchman, apologist for supernatural Christianity, and theological educator.

### **THE HANDWRITING OF J. GRESHAM MACHEN AND TRANSCRIPTION PROBLEMS**

Any hand-written letter presents challenges concerning paleography and the script of J. Gresham Machen is no exception. When he had time to sit down at a table and write, his letters were legible, but due to aircraft attacks, chemical gas dispersions, artillery shells, and his many duties as a YMCA worker, his writing was sometimes scribbled yielding a cryptic scrawl. At one point, Dr. Machen was using a pen that he described as "a watering can" because the ink flowed too freely. So, there were good reasons for the unclear characters of Machen's script. Since this volume of Machen's war letters may encourage other people to dig into his vast collection in the archives at Westminster Seminary, it is appropriate to point out a few of the lessons learned by the editor during his transcribing in hopes of easing the interpretive task for future readers.

One transcription problem early on was the identification of Machen's upper case "N." A word kept appearing "\_ena," where the blank designates the character in question. The mysterious letter looked like a shark tooth with its point at the top. After repeated occurrences, the letter was found to be "N," so that the word was "Nena." "Nena" was his sister-in-law. The editor also found it difficult to differentiate a "T" from a "t" due to the horizontal line not always being precisely located. Generally, Machen's uppercase letters are written a bit differently and they require some getting used to as one reads his handwriting. One aspect of his script is his practice of attaching his first person singular personal pronoun ("I") to the following word. For example, "Iremember," "Iwent," "Isaw," etc., is the way he wrote anything preceded by an "I." This habit becomes more confusing as the rapidity of his writing increases; the "I" gets closer

and closer to the following word so that this quirk requires the reader to take a moment to decipher the word. Another situation requiring deciphering of his writing is his lower case “n” sometimes looks like his “u,” which looks like his “v” that sometimes could be an “o” or an “a”—the letter finally selected by the editor was interpreted by context and previous uses, but there may be some transcribed words that are errant due to confusion of these letters. Machen had a tendency to start a letter with a clear handwriting and then as he progressed, the script deteriorated in quality. It is almost as if he was thinking, “I know my handwriting is not always clear, so I am going to do a better job in this letter,” but then as he progressed in his composition in a less than irenic environment, the spirit was willing but the flesh was weak.

His use of a fountain pen—the most common type of his era—contributed to some of the difficulties faced in the transcription process. One of his practices most destructive to the clarity of his script was his correcting errors by writing *over* the mistake. It would have been helpful if he had lined-out the error and written the correction above, below, or after the mistake, but unfortunately, this is not the case. His use of a fountain pen increased problems because if he corrected his error as he wrote, then the original and the correction bled together, but if he corrected the error later, there was not so much bleeding and the word can sometimes be deciphered. Whether done during his writing or as post-completion editing, the overwriting makes some words totally indecipherable and in the cases where one finds “bi\_\_\_” or “\_\_\_ed” or “\_\_\_” in the transcriptions, it may be due to overwriting. The length of the underline may or may not indicate the number of letters in the word or words; in some cases the script is so poor that the editor could not decipher the number of letters.

The recent article by William D. Dennison, “J. Gresham Machen’s Letters Home from Marburg, 1905–1906,” *Zeitschrift für neuere Theologiegeschichte/Journal for the History of Modern Theology* 16 (2009): 241–75, provides transcriptions of several letters. An examination of these transcriptions will show how clearly Dr. Machen could compose a letter when he had the time and the convenience of a desk and did not have to be concerned about gas, “Y” responsibilities, enemy aircraft, sleeping, eating, and attacking troops. The letters included in this article were written to Machen’s mother, father, and his brothers Arly

and Tom; the content is more theological in nature due to his learning experience studying New Testament in Germany. Just as Machen complained in his war letters about his poor acquisition of the French language, so he complained about his inability to grasp German in the 1905–6 correspondence; he had the bar held high with respect to his own expectations.<sup>5</sup> Machen's sympathies for the Germans and their involvement in the war would have been built upon his experiences living with the nationals during his studies in their country.<sup>6</sup>

As for Machen's French, for someone who complained often about how little of the language he had learned, his errors of spelling, including the accents, were rare; undoubtedly his expertise as a New Testament scholar drove him to render the language as accurately as he could (he often refers to "LaRousse," which was the French-English dictionary that he used). Despite his being hard on himself regarding his acquisition of French, it would seem that he instead did remarkably well considering the pressures of his work with the YMCA. As the letters are read it will be found that during his time in Paris, he often attended French plays, some of which dated to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This means that he would have acquired not only a substantial vocabulary but also a vocabulary covering three centuries. In addition to the dramatic performances, he sometimes mentions reading the play in French before attending its theatrical presentation.

The letters are arranged in simple chronological order. The vast majority of the correspondence was sent by Dr. Machen to his mother, but there are some letters to other members of his family and a few friends. The letters vary in length from two or three pages in the original manuscripts to over twenty.

## LOCATING CITIES AND GEOGRAPHICAL CHARACTERISTICS

Most of Dr. Machen's work with the YMCA in France was situated around Soissons, northeast of Paris, but other areas include Paris; several locations around Roeselare, Belgium; towns between Troyes and Dijon; villages around Baccarat; towns to the northwest of Nancy; and

5. See page 256 of the article for Machen's complaint regarding his grasp of the German language.

6. Hart, 45-46.

the cities west of Paris—Tours, Angers, and Le Mans. He said of the locations of his service, “To sum up, I saw something of five sectors of the front—Aisne, Lorraine, Argonne, Woëvre & Belgium.”<sup>7</sup>

It is suggested that if the reader is interested in following Dr. Machen’s journeys, the purchase of a copy of Michelin’s *France: Tourist and Motoring Atlas*, 2007, which contains 350 detailed regional maps and an extensive index will be helpful. The editor, after wasting his money on some lesser maps, found this atlas by Europe’s premier mapmaker to be ideal for locating even the smallest villages.<sup>8</sup> It was also found that Michelin’s inexpensive pocket tourist map of Paris was helpful for following Machen’s movements while in the grand city of lights.<sup>9</sup> Dr. Machen went to great trouble to add village and city names in marginal notes in his letters after his return to America. He could not include the names of geographical locations when he wrote the letters due to censorship concerns.<sup>10</sup> The editor has provided footnotes locating the various towns and villages mentioned by Machen by means of their distance from larger towns and these accompanied with the atlas of France will allow the reader to follow his trips. In addition to these resources, his letter of January 5, 1919, to his mother provides a narrative of his early movements. The reader is referred to the section of maps provided in this book for an overview of his locations of service.

Another source that may prove helpful for those who want to walk in Dr. Machen’s shoes is the Internet service provided by Google Maps, which proved especially helpful through use of its *satellite* and *street* views. The satellite view allows one to get a sense of the size of a battlefield or village, or the route of a street, river, or railroad. In some of the footnotes, the editor has used the Google street view to describe buildings as they were at the time the street view was filmed by Google. Many of the buildings in Paris mentioned by Dr. Machen

7. See his letter to Mary Gresham Machen (in succeeding citations abbreviated as MGM) 1/5/1919 for his mention of the regions he labored in for the YMCA.

8. *Michelin France: Tourist and Motoring Atlas* (Clermont-Ferrand: Michelin, 2007).

9. *Michelin New Edition Paris Plan with Street Index* (Paris: Michelin Maps and Guides, n.d.).

10. The censors were concerned that if mail in transit fell into enemy hands the location and strength of military units could be discerned from information in the letters. In the case of Machen’s letters, it seems that the most touchy information included geographical locations, division names, and details about battles. In one case, Machen mentioned a secret installation and the material was snipped from the pages by the censors.

are extant and can be viewed using the street view feature. The editor found the street view helpful in locating the churches Machen attended for worship and some of the Paris sites that he visited. The opportunity to walk in the steps of historical figures in grand old cities like Paris, London, or Rome, is facilitated by some of the tools offered by Internet sources. However, it must be remembered that it has been nearly a century since the First World War, so one should keep in mind that geography, street names and routes, new highways, buildings destroyed by war and fire, and other modifications may have affected current geography, topography, and buildings.

### **THE FIRST WORLD WAR UNTIL THE ENTRY OF THE UNITED STATES INTO THE CONFLICT**

On Sunday, June 28, 1914, in Sarajevo, the spark igniting the flames that erupted into the Great War occurred when the Serbian anarchist/terrorist Gavrilo Princip shot the heir to the Hapsburg throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand. The first shot fired from Princip's automatic pistol entered the Archduke's wife, Sofia. It was the second cartridge fired that propelled the round into the Archduke near his heart. Both Franz and Sofia died before they arrived at the hospital. By July 6, the tension created by the assassination led to the German government's support of Austro-Hungary's desire to take reprisals against Serbia. As the events continued their domino-like results, Austro-Hungary and Germany allied, while France, Russia, and England united as their opposition. By the end of August, the Austro-Hungarians had invaded Serbia, the French had moved into Lorraine, the Germans had invaded France, the Russians invaded East Prussia, and the Germans surrendered to Anglo-French forces in Togoland, West Africa. The shots fired by the anarchist Princip ignited a catastrophic war involving many nations in conflict on battlefields scattered all over the globe.

As the war intensified and involved other nations, the United States followed an isolationist plan under the leadership of President Woodrow Wilson. Though isolationist with respect to declaring war, the United States was a supplier of arms and materials for the European war effort. The sinking of the *Lusitania*, the sabotage of a munitions plant in Delaware, the sinking of United States freighters by German



U-boats, and Germany's clandestine encouraging of Mexico to invade Texas all contributed to the United States declaring war on Germany, April 6, 1917. By the time the United States entered the war, the conflict had killed multitudes and destroyed property throughout the world. France suffered a particularly heavy burden of death and destruction. New technologies such as the airplane, tank, poisonous gas, and more powerful ordnance had increased the maiming and destructive power of war. The Germans were hoping that their spring offensive in 1918 would enjoy success due to the Bolsheviks having seized power in Russia in November 1917. The Russian Revolution allowed Germany to shift troops gradually from the Eastern front to the trenches in France. As Dr. Machen entered France to serve with the YMCA in January 1918, he would see the final German spring offensive, the *Kaiserschlacht* (Kaiser's Battle) or Michael Offensive, begin in March.

### **THE WORK IN FRANCE BY THE YOUNG MEN'S CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION (YMCA)**

Once the United States committed to enter the war, J. Gresham Machen wanted to contribute his labors to the effort. He thought of serving as a chaplain, as a secretary of a YMCA in France, or with the ambulance corps. The chaplaincy had no openings and service with the ambulance corps was abandoned when he was informed that he could be reassigned from an ambulance to a munitions transport. He was concerned to work with an organization that allowed him to befriend the enlisted men while providing noncombatant services.

When the choices were assessed, the YMCA became his field of service for the war effort. He believed that the "Y" was not the ideal organization for service, but he also thought he could serve effectively without seriously compromising his theological principles. He was particularly concerned about possible disregard of the Sabbath by the YMCA due to its commitment to a generic Christianity. In September 1917, he had the opportunity to speak in some YMCA meetings in Newport, Rhode Island, which helped him to understand the work of the "Y" better. As Dr. Machen learned more about the service he would be giving as a "Y" secretary, he said that it "seems to be just the kind of work I *dislike* most, but that is no insuperable objection to my going into it. It consists largely of selling postage stamps and

‘mixing’.”<sup>11</sup> Despite his reservations about the “Y,” he believed there was great need for its work with the soldiers and it was the best and least compromising opportunity he had available to him for service.<sup>12</sup>

When Dr. Machen began his work with the “Y” in France, he was initially stationed near the front in a cooperative effort of the Americans and the French named the *Foyer du Soldat, Union Franco-Américaine*. The huts operated by the cooperative program were prohibited to have any political and sectarian propaganda and were not allowed to serve alcoholic beverages. Each hut was to maintain a library of 200 books that had been approved by a committee appointed by the Minister for War. As will be seen in the letters that follow, one of the major services provided by the foyers was selling snacks, toiletries, money orders, stationery, postage, and distributing refreshing beverages such as hot chocolate. When the war was over, it was determined that 1,452 foyers had been opened of which 130 were captured or destroyed by the enemy (Dr. Machen narrowly escaped a foyer that was seized by the Germans). It should be noted that the USO (United Service Organization) was not organized until 1941, and the YMCA huts served to fill the need for a place of rest, entertainment, and refreshment for the war-wearied troops.<sup>13</sup>

11. Stonehouse, 213; one of the weaknesses of Stonehouse’s book is the lack of documentation. However, since the book is written chronologically, this quotation was probably taken from a letter written between Aug. 25 and Sept. 19, 1917.

12. This paragraph is a summary of Stonehouse, 211-15.

13. *Summary of World War Work of the American Y.M.C.A.*, The International Committee of the Young Men’s Christian Association, 1920, 55.

# CONVENTIONS USED IN THE LETTER TRANSCRIPTIONS

DR. MACHEN MENTIONS several people, literary works, authors, plays, and other items that are identified for the reader. A glossary of people, plays, literature, and other terms considered uncommon has been included at the end of this book. It is suggested that the reader examine the glossary before reading the letters to be familiar with the glossary contents. Some common names of great fame, such as Robert E. Lee, have been left out of the glossary due to their identities being common knowledge. Readers of this letter collection will vary in interest from the skim-and-spot-read tactic to those who want to know every jot-and-tittle, so the glossary was used to reduce the amount of material to be included in the footnotes.

As Dr. Machen learned French, he used the language in his letters. French terminology is translated in the footnotes. In most cases, the translations are of a few words or less, but some of the translations are longer.

There are some references to web addresses in the documentation for information regarding Machen's letters. For example, the footnote describing "Dover's Powder" was taken from a website. Thanks to the web entry the reader can understand what Machen meant when he said, "a thing wrapped up like Dover's Powder," as he described the writing ink he was using (MGM, April 5, 1918).

Each chapter title includes the beginning and ending dates of the chapter. That is, the dates are those of the first letter in the chapter and the last date of the last letter. Some of the letters were written over a period of more than one day, so the last date in the title is that of the latest date given by Machen in the last letter of the chapter.

At the beginning of each chapter, following the title, are a few lines of italicized text. These sentences provide a summary of what is to follow in the letters of that chapter. This summary will give the reader a sense of what is to follow and provide continuity from one chapter to the next.

Many of the letters have notes in their margins that were added later by Dr. Machen. The notes are included in the footnotes of the transcriptions. These notes mostly provided the names of cities and towns that Machen could not mention in the letters due to censorship.

*Please note that the letters have been transcribed, as much as possible, as Dr. Machen wrote them.* In some cases, the reader will find some of the sentences cumbersome, over or under punctuated, or a bit difficult to comprehend, *but* this is how he wrote them amid the pressures of his YMCA service and the distractions of war. In a few cases, the editor felt it necessary to adjust the structure of the sentences because the original was too difficult to follow.

## "OVER THERE"<sup>1</sup>

*January 22 to February 10, 1918*

*Following a safe and U-boat free voyage across the Atlantic, J. Gresham Machen would enter France. While waiting for his YMCA assignment in Paris, the Princeton scholar will seek to immerse himself in the French language through conversation, reading literature, and enjoying the theater. He will find the widow of a local Protestant pastor who will converse with him in French as they enjoy the meals she prepares. Dr. Machen expresses his frustration with his fellow Americans over their failure to try and learn to speak at least some French.*

*[This letter was written on letterhead that reads, "Cie Gle Transatlantique, A Bord."]*

***le 22 Janvier 1918 (Tuesday)***

My dearest Mother:

Although we are not expected to get to port until about Friday, it is time for me at least to begin my letter home. Preparation for one or two Y.M.C.A. exercises in which I have taken part on board, though it has not taken much actual time, has served to occupy my thoughts and prevent me from doing anything else with a perfectly clear conscience.

1. "Over There," is a war song published by George M. Cohan in 1917. The relevant portion of the lyrics is, "Over there, over there, Send the word, send the word over there—That the Yanks are coming, The Yanks are coming, The drums rum-tumming Ey'rywhere . . ." etc.

I went aboard the ship on Tuesday afternoon, January 15, at about four o'clock. After passing the last barrier near the gang plank I was at once cut off from my native land, for the regulations prevent passengers who have once entered the ship from going ashore again. Since I was wearing my overseas uniform, which is not supposed to be worn in America, I was unwilling to be seen about town, there was therefore no use in remaining off the boat. It is true, I forgot a small detail of my equipment, and in order to supply the lack went up to Y.M.C.A. headquarters on that Tuesday afternoon when I found the boat was not to sail at once. But I made the trip both ways in a taxi. On the return trip to the boat, I stopped at a little stationer's store and sent you a farewell word, & also tried, before I went aboard, to get Jessie on the phone, but failed. With Cousin Saida I was more successful.

The only time I have felt cold since coming was in New York harbor before we left the dock. Leaving the porthole open right above my berth, I found the air a little chilly. This fact is noteworthy not at all because it involved any serious discomfort, but only because it serves to bring out better by way of contrast the surprising fact that during the rest of the trip we have been as warm as toast.

Rather to my surprise, the ship set sail almost exactly at seven o'clock on Wednesday morning, in accordance with the announcement posted the day before. We slipped down the familiar harbor in quite the usual way, and had pleasant smooth weather when we reached the open sea. Steamer chairs and rugs were secured in quite the usual tourist way, and everything ran on just about as we are all so well accustomed to it until nightfall. Then the first striking evidence of war-time appeared in the careful way in which every possible chink is closed to avoid allowing any light to be seen from outside. The main stairway is darkened, so that there is no appearance of light outside when passengers go out on deck; the lights in the salon and smoking room are so reduced that the skylights cease to be a cause of danger; and passengers are strictly forbidden to smoke or use flashlights on the deck. How you would revel in these regulations! They could give you a magnificent opportunity of observing the stars. Only, no stars have

been visible on this particular voyage. The first night or two were black as Egypt<sup>2</sup> on deck, so that really it was difficult, after one had ventured out, to find the door again. There was one evening when the sky was clear, but on that evening things would have been spoiled for you by a bright moon.

On Saturday the sea began to rise, and during a considerable part of Sunday, passengers (or at least for some hours) were altogether prevented from going out on deck. Since the windows were not only closed with glass, but also battened down by metal covers, it was rather a gloomy morning. I did not know, however, that the sea was any higher than I have seen it once or twice on my summer voyages. Something was wrong in a minor way with the machinery of the ship—one report was that the steering-gear was out of order—and so for some ten or twelve hours she was kept with her bow headed back toward New York, not under way but simply kept facing the wind by the use of the port engine. During Sunday afternoon, however, we turned around and got under way again, with a sea and wind from the northwest that gave her a good roll. The sight from the upper deck forward at night was particularly grand. At times the big waves seemed to stand out above the highest deck, and from a point where a good part of the ship could be seen the whole thing seemed just like a chip in comparison with the waves. The gloom added to the impressiveness of the scene. Only the port and starboard lights and one light at the foremast are kept showing. Really I have seldom been as much impressed with a sight at sea—in fact perhaps never. Since it was a following wind, we shipped comparatively little water, and it was possible to be out and enjoy the sight.

Sleeping in the latter part of the night from Saturday to Sunday was a weak effort, especially after a metal pitcher (fortunately very light) surprised me by falling from the washstand on the top of my head. Movable things generally have displayed a tendency to slide—both in the rooms and in the dining room. But “they don’t call this cold in Quebec.” In other words it is considered by no means a particularly rough winter passage—even for January,

2. Machen is referring to the plague of darkness that God brought upon Egypt to encourage Pharaoh to release the Hebrews from bondage (Exodus 10:21-29).

which is one of the best winter months. The surprising thing to me has been the warmth. Ever since we got well away from the coast the temperature has been delightful. Yesterday, for example, an overcoat was not really needed on deck, and today is similar. I have never been so comfortable, so far as temperature is concerned, on a summer voyage. People lie out in their steamer chairs just as they do in summer. I keep out of mine pretty much all the time—also just as in summer. Of course I have been in somewhat warmer clothes than I want to wear on summer voyages, but, even absolutely, I believe many of the days have been warmer than very many summer days that I have experienced on the sea.

Sunday was pretty rough, but yesterday gave us a gradually diminishing sea. Last night, however, a strong wind and sea sprang up from a new direction—south—and the boat is continuing a healthy roll. As yet I have made no contribution to the fishes, and have not come even as near it as I sometimes do.<sup>3</sup> Since I have had a good deal to do in connection with the Y.M.C.A., I have not been on deck so much & have had my mind occupied. I believe these circumstances, though they might seem rather trying, have been good for me. That “mental condition” idea of seasickness is not correct, but there is just a modicum of truth in it.<sup>4</sup>

About forty Y.M.C.A. secretaries are on board. One of them was appointed head of the party, and there has been a regular schedule of classes and other activities. The head of the party happens to be a physical director, and in accordance with the natural bent of his talents has appointed “getting up exercises” on the promenade deck at half past six in the morning. I have attended these exercises twice. It is something of a struggle to get out at that hour of the morning.

At nine o'clock in the morning we have had a course of study on the history and principles of the Y.M.C.A., and at half-past ten a course, conducted by the leader of the party, on methods of the Y.M.C.A. army work. In the afternoon there are various French classes. The advanced class, which is attended by your erudite

3. He is alluding to seasickness and the “contribution to the fishes” would be vomiting over the ship’s rail.

4. Presumably, if one thinks one is going to get sick, then one does.



son, meets at half-past two. It is conducted by a Mr. Upson, who is engaged in Red Cross work. His French is very distinctly of the American variety, so far as intonation is concerned; but his method is really very good. He tells us a little anecdote in French; then asks us questions about it (of course questions & answers are in French); then asks some member of the class to tell the anecdote over. Also M. l'Abbé—a very delightful and angelic Catholic, who looks exactly like that good, good man in *Les Misérables*—comes in and gives us little talks. When I tell you that I am by no means one of the worst members of the class—though also some distance from the top—you will understand that the standard is not extraordinarily high. Among the Y.M.C.A. men my erudition, so far as French is concerned, is considered extraordinary! Only a very few of the men of the party have any considerable knowledge of French. Linguistic opportunities aboard the ship are exceedingly limited, since the vast majority of the passengers are Americans. I have talked with stewards now and then, and had one very pleasant conversation with the Abbé. But I feel rather discouraged. I believe I could get there if I had a chance, but I am afraid there will be no chance this time in France, if I am working with the American forces, as I suppose I shall be.

On Sunday morning I made a very brief talk at the morning service in the saloon or reading-room. I was not feeling any too certain of my ability to get through with this duty—in view of the condition of the sea. The first hymn was “How Firm a Foundation.” We needed that hymn. Apparently I got through fairly well, since what I said seemed to be pretty well received by the Y.M.C.A. men. Yesterday morning I gave a little informal lecture to some of the Y.M.C.A. party on “Christianity and the World Crisis.” In it I took occasion to trace briefly the course of New Testament criticism, & say what I think the big question is. My preparation was exceedingly imperfect, since the rough weather had not been stimulating to the operation of my mind. But on the whole I think I got along better than might have been expected. Some of the men seemed to be interested. At any rate I am glad of the opportunity.

One of the members of the Y.M.C.A. party is Judge Pollard, former Attorney General of Virginia, who knows Lewis very well.

Another is a young Episcopal clergyman by the name of Lee, who is, if I got the thing straight, a grand-nephew of General R. E. Lee & a descendant of "Light Horse Harry." He knows Cousin Kensey, and seems to be a very pleasant fellow. Aunt Bessie may be interested. My two room-mates are both Y.M.C.A. men. We have an outside stateroom, on the bottom deck. The "outside" feature is not a very great deal of use, since during the night and all during the roughest weather even in the daytime a metal covering is kept over the port-hole. I have the sofa berth immediately under the port-hole. It is not a bad arrangement. The room has the great advantage of being almost immediately amidships.<sup>5</sup> That was greatly appreciated on Saturday and Sunday nights, and if the present weather continues it is going to be greatly appreciated again to-night.

The distance traversed by the ship is posted daily, but not the noon position.<sup>6</sup> At noon to-day we had about 1,150 miles more to run. We ought to be in port about Friday. Of course the most exciting times are ahead of us, when we run through the war zone, but the ship has made many runs through without having any trouble at all. A formidable looking gun is mounted on the forward deck & there is another one aft. Some days ago we had a boat drill. All the passengers put on life preservers & took their stand on the deck next to the life boats to which they have severally been assigned. Before going aboard in New York I hired a safety suit which is a big rubber affair, weighted at the feet, which is supposed to keep you dry and warm in the water, and enable you to support five other persons. It is certainly very ingenious. Lots of passengers have such suits.

*Wednesday, Jan. 23, 1918*

Little remains to be added to-day. The run of the ship up to noon was 363 miles, being about the average.<sup>7</sup> We are 790 miles

5. The closer one is to the center of the ship, the less one feels the roll (side to side motion) and pitch (bow to stern motion) of the vessel due to one's proximity to the center of gravity. For someone susceptible to nausea, this would be especially beneficial.

6. That is, the latitude and longitude are not posted at noon, but at that time the distance traveled during the previous twenty-four hours is given.

7. The speed would have been just over 15 nautical miles per hour, or about 17.5 knots.

from the mouth of the river to which we are going.<sup>8</sup> The ship, it will be observed, is not fast; but it is said to be the fastest of the French Line ships now in ordinary trans-Atlantic service. The tonnage is about 14,500. I understand the ship used to ply between France and Mexico. Certainly she has given us a very comfortable passage. The air down in our stateroom is somewhat inclined to be stuffy, since the porthole has had to be kept closed the whole time, but in general we have gotten on very well indeed. I can hardly get over my surprise at the continuous warmth of the air at this time of the year. To-day is rainy, with a considerable south wind and sea, but it is not at all cold.

Yesterday at the French class we had really a most interesting talk, made by an Italian "count," who has spent much of his life in France, seems to be a thorough Frenchman. He gave us anecdotes of his journeys in various countries of Europe, his glimpses of famous people, etc., all in a most entertaining way.

When we land the plan is to go at once to Paris, where we are to be assigned our duties. I dread this part of the business, especially since if I am asked what I want to do I do not know exactly what to say. My knowledge of the conditions of the European work is too slight. It would be more restful to be under definite military orders, where there would be no use wishing or planning. I have begun to wonder whether my knowledge of French may not be put to some use, since there seems to be so few who have gotten even as far as I. The very large group of Y.M.C.A. secretaries who went over in the boat just before ours will no doubt many of them still be waiting to be assigned. This will add to the confusion & make the work of assignment, I should think, very hasty & haphash. But the result may be better than I anticipate. At any rate, I am most fortunate to get a chance at the work.

Of course you have been in my thoughts and my prayers have been with you & and with Arly & Helen & Tom & Nena & Uncle and all those at home. Geographical separation seems to bring

8. It is noted in the letter margin that the river was "The Gironde," which is an estuary on the W. coast of France formed by the confluence of Garonne and Dordogne rivers near Bordeaux. The river extends about forty-five miles into France.

us all the closer together.<sup>9</sup> I hope to be able to add to my letter to-morrow, and so will not close as yet.

*January 25, (Friday)*

At noon today we were just fifty miles from the mouth of the Gironde and may expect to land at Bordeaux very early to-morrow morning. Little remains to be told about the closing days of the voyage. We have had a number of most interesting lectures in the French class by a French naval officer who, I understand, was a member of some mission in the United States. At one lecture he read a good deal of French poetry—a most discouraging feature to me, since I get very little of the poetry. The weather has been rough part of the time, but to-day we have a smooth sea. The chill of the land climate is making itself felt in comparison with the warm days that we have had in the ocean, but even yet it is not at all cold.

The war zone is being crossed altogether without excitement. Five men are now constantly on watch by the gun forward, and I believe the ship's lights are not lighted at night, but there seems to be no real expectation of seeing a submarine. Nobody on board, so far as I can see, has lost the slightest sleep about the matter. Certainly I have slept very well. Some passengers, I believe, slept on deck, but that was not advised by the ship's authorities or considered necessary. I did sleep in some of my clothes last night, but made myself thoroughly comfortable. There was a big benefit auction sale in the reading room last night. A glass of beer brought \$100 etc. etc.<sup>10</sup> It is now nearly one o'clock, and since we were only fifty miles from the mouth of the river at noon, it will be seen that the voyage is nearly over. The customs police authorities are to come aboard at the mouth of the river. A minor discomfort of travel just now is the difficulty, amounting almost to impossibility, of securing French change. Brown Brothers in New York could give me some, and diligent pestering of the purser, buying of useless bottles of ginger ale, buying of stamps

9. Absence makes the heart grow fonder?

10. Yes, it is \$100 and not 1.00.

etc. has only brought me a few francs in silver.<sup>11</sup> I have plenty of five-franc notes, but they are too big to give a porter. We hope to get the Saturday morning train to Paris. It is pretty nearly time to mail the letters; so I say good bye for the present and send lots of care to all.

Your loving son,  
Gresham



*[The following letters were written on the letterhead of the "Hotel Beaulieu, 8, Rue Balzac, Champs-Élysées—Paris, Despouys, Prop<sup>re</sup>".]*

**January 29, 1918**

My dearest Mother:

It seems a long time since I wrote to you from the steamer, and I am afraid it will seem longer still before the present letter arrives. Mail, I am informed, especially on account of the censorship, is necessarily very irregular. It is really hardly worthwhile for me to begin expecting anything from home just yet, but I shall inquire this afternoon when I go to the Y.M.C.A. office. Needless to say I am eager to hear from you and all of those at home.

After passing through the submarine zone without the slightest interest on the part of anybody, so far as I could see, we arrived at the mouth of the river on Friday afternoon.<sup>12</sup> The passage of the bar, which on account of thick weather conditions was out of sight of land, was rather curious. On account of comparatively shallow water the ocean swell became remarkably regular and powerful. The great surges really looked to me about

11. He is referring to what is currently, since 1931, Brown Brothers Harriman & Co., which is a commercial banking and investment company. Brown Brothers opened its first office in New York City in 1825. In Machen's time, the business was known as Brown Brothers Bank (from: [www.bbhc.com](http://www.bbhc.com)). It would seem that Machen did not like ginger ale and only wanted the change.

12. A note in the margin designates the river as "The Gironde," per his comment in the January 22 letter.

an eighth of a mile long and yet quite steep at the crest. When they caught the vessel sideways they made her roll fully and deeply (though not as quickly) as in the stormiest weather that we had had in mid-ocean. The weather was fair and beautiful, the fog-banks only adding to the beauty of the scene. After the police and customs and railroad officials came aboard we had the hardest night of work that I ever spent in my life. Passports had to be examined, railroad tickets bought, baggage passed by customs officials and checked for Paris. I worked from about nine o'clock until 3 a.m. Then I turned in for three or four hours of sleep. At that time, the dock was reported to be only two hours distant and the ship was proceeding merrily on her way. But alas when we awoke in the morning we discovered that a sudden fog, which had disappeared as quickly as it had arrived, had caused us to miss the tide necessary for getting up the river. Accordingly we had to wait all the morning until the afternoon tide permitted us to proceed. But we felt repaid by the daylight ride up the river, which was interesting in itself, as the approach to Europe always is, but doubly interesting this time because it gave us our first vivid impression of France at war. And I cannot begin to tell you how vivid the impression was. We landed on the dock at dusk, and were taken at once in a very efficient way by a Y.M.C.A. man (or by Y.M.C.A. men) to a hotel where we got supper and thence to the station.<sup>13</sup> At this point I may remark that all the Y.M.C.A. management of our party of about seventy people was a model of efficiency. All the efficiency in the world, however, could not save us from the very tiresome night trip to Paris in ordinary second-class compartments. The very few of the party who had secured berths relinquished them to the ladies. We left the port at 10 P.M. and got to Paris at about 8 A.M. There were five in the compartment where I was, and for my part I got very little sleep. This made the second night's sleep even more important, but we all still felt a little needy the next day. Fortunately the weather was warm, and we hired blanket and pillow—the latter being of very

13. A note in the margin clarifies that this dock was in "Bordeaux."

little use to me since I had no room to use it—so that we had no taste of serious discomfort.<sup>14</sup>

On arrival at Paris Sunday morning we were taken in a body to the Hotel Wagram for breakfast, words of welcome, and instruction.<sup>15</sup> Then the party was distributed among various hotels. I drew the Hotel Lord Byron, out near the Etoile,<sup>16</sup> but not finding a separate room there am settled at a small hotel affiliated with the Lord Byron.<sup>17</sup> The quarters are fairly good, and since this hotel is even smaller than the Lord Byron, which itself is not large, there is some opportunity to talk French in a routine way. Of course there are some Americans here as everywhere. The hotel is in a pleasant quiet neighborhood just north of the Avenue des Champs-Élysées, and quite near the Etoile. The métro station is not far off.<sup>18</sup> That is a great advantage since the métro, when one learns to use it, is enormously convenient.

I did not go to church on Sunday, since getting into my room, about which there was a little delay, and sending my cablegram home took up my time. I had been much troubled about not getting the cablegram off from the port of arrival, but that was absolutely impossible, and if it had been possible I am informed that it would not have been any quicker. At any rate, I do trust you got either the Y.M.C.A. message or my own cablegram or both without undue delay. I had both sent to Arly since I thought receiving the cablegram directly might have been too exciting for you, and since I knew he could be trusted to give you the information at once. Probably you would open the message if he happened to be away.

On Sunday I met Birdie, who had come over on the boat preceding mine, but had not yet gotten started for the field. The

14. That is, Machen rented a blanket and a pillow but due to space restraints, he could not use the pillow. However, it did not matter because he was fairly comfortable despite the lack of a pillow.

15. The spelling was difficult to decipher and this may not be the correct name for the hotel. "Wagran" may be the name.

16. The "Etoile" refers to the traffic circle and area in which the Arc de Triomphe is located.

17. There is currently a Lord Byron Hotel in Paris that is located at 5 Rue Chateaubriand, which puts it near the Etoile and just N of the Avenue des Champs-Élysées, as Machen notes later in this paragraph. It may be the same hotel that he is describing in his letter. The smaller hotel where Machen stayed would be the Hotel Beaulieu named in the letterhead.

18. The "métro" is the Paris subway system.

meeting was exceedingly pleasant. We had lunch together on Sunday. I was glad to get the advantage of Birdie's experience.

On Sunday afternoon we had the first of a series of conferences at the Y.M.C.A. office. Mr. Carter, the general director, and Mr. Davis of the French work were the two principal speakers. They are both of them evidently able men. The impression made upon me by the Y.M.C.A. leaders generally with whom we have come into contact is that they are doing a large work in a large way.

*Wednesday, Jan. 30, 1918*

(It is hard to begin a letter under present conditions, but even harder to finish it—here I am continuing on a new day.)

Naturally, after two sleepless nights, sleep was very much in order on Sunday night. On Monday, our conferences, which provide us with information of various kinds were continued, and they have lasted until to-day. One of the leaders turns out to be Bobby Freeman, who graduated two years after me and lived over me in Alexander Hall at the Seminary during the winter of 1906–1907. He has really been just as good to me as he can be—not only in having me in to dinner, but also in saying that he is sure that sooner or later he will want me for the religious work. I was pleased at his cordiality, since I did not know what his opinion of me was. You may remember my having spoken of his career. Even during his Seminary courses he was in charge of a large Buffalo church from which he finally went to Pasadena. He has made a tremendous success, and is much looked to as a speaker over here as well as at home.

On Tuesday we had each a five-minute interview with Mr. Carter. I told him frankly how I felt. You may be interested in knowing how that was. It may be summed up under two contrasted heads:

(1) I have some start in French, and as far as my own personal preference I would greatly prefer to go into the French work. Just think of what an interesting experience that would be, and what a broadening affect it would have on all the rest of my life! But I was afraid it was selfish. For—



(2) All my training is for Bible teaching and the like which is not done in the slightest among the French troops, and indeed for certain reasons must be carefully excluded.

I also talked to Mr. Davis, head of the French work. The decision was reached by the leaders independent of my will. It is as follows: I am assigned to the French work temporarily, with the possibility of a change later on. I must say I am delighted with the decision, though I would not have taken the responsibility of making it myself. In the French work I am to be connected with the "Foyers de Soldats." It is a glorious chance, it seems to me, humble as the functions of the secretary might to some people seem to be. We are to provide recreation, not amusement for the men, and serve in a number of little ways. I am greatly in the mood of the thing.

Don't take a gloomy view of my turning aside from what now as always I regard as my life-work. A preacher who is preaching all the time is oft to run dry. There are many kinds of preparation that I need; and the kind of thing that I am going into now, just because of the academic life that I have been leading, is perhaps a thing that I need most of all. That does not mean that it is to be looked upon as new preparation for something in the future! On the contrary, it is a most glorious opportunity to render service where service is most deserved. I only hope I can make good. Certainly I feel inadequate enough in various ways.

Of course, I could not say where I am to be stationed even if I knew. But as a matter of fact I do not know as yet. Two other men of our party were assigned to the French work. We shall probably be in Paris at least five days more.

You will notice that my letter has been of a personal kind with out effort at describing the looks of things over here. The latter kind of letter of course cannot be expected in war time except within certain restrictions. Probably, however, it will not offend the censor to say that Paris in general seems perhaps a little more nearly normal than I had expected. At night war-time appears in the dark streets. It is really at times almost difficult to find your way around, if the names of the streets at the corners are not near lamps. There is illumination of the streets, but it is kept very

dim. Of course soldiers are every where, but there is perhaps a larger proportion of civilians than I had expected to be. Yesterday morning we experienced the Paris fog. I wonder if a London fog is any thicker. Certainly this was much the thickest fog that I ever saw; you could often not see across the street. The effect was weird. But the weather (even yesterday after the sun got its power) has been uniformly warm and clear—day after day of almost spring-like weather.

My letter is very inadequate for various reasons. I do not know whether I am right in being so sympathetic to what takes one away from work with our American boys & from the kind of work that I have already been doing. But the decision was not mine. I am to obey orders. And I do so gladly. If I am in the wrong place I have faith enough to believe that I may be put in the right one hereafter. I have not been able to let you understand all the ramifications of the situation.

Love and then more love,  
Your affectionate son,  
J. Gresham Machen



*Tuesday, Feb. 5, 1918*

My dearest Mother:

My last letter, if I remember correctly, was written last Wednesday. Since that time I have been very busy getting nothing done. A lot of engagements during the former part of the time left little bits of mornings and afternoons which were just enough to begin things but not enough to finish. Having determined that I had to have another uniform, one of those that I secured in America being very unsatisfactory and in particular quite impossible for Paris use, I have spent a good deal of my time with a tailor having the new uniform made and the old ones repaired

and altered. It would be stupid for one to attempt to say how many other little things I have had to do, and in particular how many remain to be done. However, it is not these trifles that have delayed my getting out of Paris. That is due to a delay about the necessary military pass. Such delay does not at all indicate a hitch anywhere, but is quite a frequent occurrence. In all probability I shall be detained for days or so still. Of course I feel exceedingly useless and ridiculous loafing around here after my companions on the voyage are nearly all engaged in the work for which they came. But if it were not for this feeling I should really be having a most delightful time. That is what gives me a twinge of conscious. The idea of having a delightful time in the midst of the misery of this war when whatever work I may be able to do has not even been undertaken, much less accomplished! However, the thing is not to be helped, for the idleness is enforced.

And it is not all idleness after all, for to say nothing of the constant labors about my equipment, I have now seriously gotten into the job of learning French. As soon as I could snatch enough time away from shopping, I looked up a French widow lady, Madame Lalot, who lives on the Rue Vaugirard, not far from the Luxembourg, and desires to take American boarders.<sup>19</sup> The two other Americans who are to go into the French work with me visited Mme. Lalot, but decided that the time was too short and her room too unsatisfactory for them to move into her home. The negative decision at once awakened my interest. I could not imagine anything more deadly than living in close intimacy with two Americans who speak little or no French, and seem to have very little gumption about learning. The chance to learn French under such conditions! But when they decided not to go to Mme. Lalot, I at once made an opposite decision. I had a very pleasant conversation with the lady on Saturday afternoon and arranged to take lunch and dinner with her every day beginning with Sunday. Because of washing that I had sent out, bundles that were to come from stores, a tailor in the vicinity etc.—a lot of things that centered around my old room at this hotel—I decided not

19. The "Rue de Vaugirard" currently runs from the Palais du Luxembourg, S.W., to the Palais des Sports.

to move my numberless pieces of baggage. So I am sleeping here and getting my breakfast near here, but taking lunch and dinner at Mme. Lalot's apartment. Since up to now I have been the only boarder, the arrangement has been a magnificent success. It really makes me feel like an utter fool to realize that all these years a fairly satisfactory working knowledge of French was all this time a thing that could have been grasped at any moment. After two days in a real French environment, I feel altogether different with regard to the language. Conversation with Mme. Lalot seems to proceed perfectly well, and I am having the time of my life. Of course you must not exaggerate the degree of my progress; I don't mean to say that I have yet by any means attained the degree of proficiency procured by the rest of the family. But my progress has astounded me. I really believe too—such is the enthusiasm of my first steps—that if I had a chance I could speak French with a less hopelessly Broadway intonation than that which is exhibited by most of the Americans over here.

Mme. Lalot is a dear old lady, I should say well over seventy. She is the widow of a Protestant pastor, and engages with great enthusiasm in ministering to the poor and to wounded soldiers. She is living all alone just now with an amorous pussy-cat and one servant. I keep her company, and ostensibly take one French lesson a day. But the "lesson" is just salve for my conscience for getting a free lesson the best part of the day. I joined Mme. Lalot at the Oratoire on Sunday morning. M. Alfred Monod preached a long sermon on "give us this day our daily bread," à propos of the loyal use of the bread-ticket system. I was disappointed. It was all perfectly good in its way. But it was not at all the bread of life. After Church, Mme. Lalot and I had lunch together and then went out to visit a poor family. With the necessary peregrinations, métro and electric car rides, etc. this took all the afternoon. Then dinner and on to bed. On Monday I spent the morning at the tailor's, then took lunch with Mme. Lalot, had a French "lesson," went to the tailor's again to have an overcoat shortened that meanwhile I had burned along the bottom on the stove, then went way back to Mme. Lalot's to dinner, and then took her to the Théâtre Français, where we saw the "Tartuffe" of Molière. I

had a bump so far as my linguistic aspirations are concerned. I cannot understand French poetry, even when I have read it beforehand. After the theatre I took Mme. Lalot home & then made the long journey back to my own domicile. Since the métro stops running at 11.30 P.M., and electric cars at that hour or before, and since taxis are rare birds at that time of night, I had to hoof it. Fortunately I had taken the same walk in the day time. Otherwise I might well have lost my way in the dark streets. A walk of three quarters of an hour like that is quite impressive in its gloom and lonesomeness. To-night I am going to take Mme. Lalot to the Odéon to see Victor Hugo's "Marion de Lorme," but since the Odéon is near her apartment, I shall no doubt be able to catch the métro.

After such pleasant and profitable experiences as I have had with Mme. Lalot you can imagine my disgust when a rather-commonplace American fella appeared on the scene to-day. He knows scarcely any French at all, and converses with Mme. Lalot in English. He expects to become a regular boarder to-morrow & to take a room. Well, I knew the bully time I have been having was too good to last. I feel as though I were let down with a bang. Most of these fellows seem to have absolutely no gumption about them, no shame about using English. I do hope that whatever place I get in the French work I get a place where there is no other American. There is absolutely no way to learn French & be really useful in a French environment except to eschew English for twenty-four hours out of the twenty-four.

When I said, in referring to last Sunday night, that after dinner I went to bed, I forgot the talk that I made to the American boys at the American Army and Navy Y.M.C.A. at 31 Ave. Montaigne.<sup>20</sup> It was a fine little crowd to talk to. I had a good time, & hope I may have been useful. The Y.M.C.A. has splendid quarters some people think almost too splendid.

Last Wednesday night we passed through an air raid. Since it is ancient history now, and has no doubt been reported in the American papers, there is I suppose no harm in my telling you where I was when it occurred.

20. This is less than half-a-mile, as the crow flies, from Machen's hotel.

I was just returning from the theatre on Wednesday evening. When I got out of the métro I noticed a good deal of confusion on the avenue, but paid little attention to the matter till a little later, when I discovered that the confusion was due to the running of fire apparatus through the principal streets with their sirens that act as a danger signal. For an hour or so I stayed out in the streets and "rubbered."<sup>21</sup> There were the moving lights of French airplanes here and there, also little flashes which I suppose indicated aerial battles with German airplanes. One brilliantly lighted plane passed directly over our heads, and very near. This was about all that we saw. As to what we heard, that might have seemed to untrained ears to be anything. I thought it probably came for the most part from anti-aircraft guns. Finally there were two explosions louder than the others, after which most of the people near me, including myself, went indoors. After a time I went to bed, before the signal was given announcing the conclusion of the raid. Somehow, I did not feel enormously excited most of the time. But really I had no idea of the seriousness of it. When I heard after wards that nearly fifty people had been killed and many others wounded I was quite astonished. The whole thing, though it lasted with intervals perhaps nearly two hours, passed off so very quietly. The next day I observed the damage here and there in the city. It was all most interesting and of course most distressing. The crowd took it in a very matter-of-fact way. An occasional mild "Cochons!" was all that I heard.<sup>22</sup> But you just ought to have seen the crowd at one place on Sunday viewing the ruins. It was really a show in itself.

Next time I shall not, I think, promenade about the streets. The truth is that this time not only did my natural curiosity get the better of me, but also I did not realize how much protection it is to stay in the house. I had a sort of notion that a safe a place as any would be in open spaces where houses cannot fall on you. This is about as silly an idea as can be imagined. Not only the papers, but also a personal examination of the way the fragments scatter, convinced me of the fact. Stay in the house and keep away from the windows, and the risk is very slight. Of course, if a bomb strikes the

21. The term one might use today would be "rubber-necked."

22. A French epithet meaning "dirty pigs," "swine," or "beasts," referring to the Germans.

very house where you are, you may get hurt, but you are protected from flying fragments. Also cellars & métro stations, I believe, are to be utilized.

The astounding thing about Paris just now is the normality of life. Those who think that France is at the end of her strength have another guess coming. The vast machinery of life in this city is going on without interruption. In many respects we in America have been much more disorganized on account of the war. Of course I am not speaking about the spiritual side of the thing. The sacrifices have been tremendous. But that does not prevent a marvelous efficiency in the conduct of life.

Good-bye for the present, and nobody knows how much love to all—  
your loving son,  
J. Gresham Machen<sup>23</sup>



*February 10, 1918*

My dearest Mother:

My last letter was written in the exuberance of my first experience of life in a French environment. That exuberance has now run its course, and I have come to the sobering conclusion that my efforts at learning the French language are utterly footless. Until Friday evening inclusive, I kept up the arrangement by which I slept here and took my lunch and dinner with Mme. Lalot, near the Luxembourg.<sup>24</sup> Since there was some chance of getting away on Saturday and since in the midst of the preparations for departure it would have been highly inconvenient to try to live in two places at once, I bade farewell to Mme. Lalot. The farewell was attended with somewhat less regret than you might have supposed from my last

23. The last three lines of Machen's letter were forced into a small space as he concluded his thoughts.

24. The "Luxembourg," refers to the Palais du Luxembourg (Palace of Luxembourg) and its large gardens.

letter. Mme. Lalot is a very good lady, but her intellectual interests are not extensive and a tête-à-tête with her day after day proved at times to be somewhat wearisome.<sup>25</sup> Fortunately, the American fellow of whom I wrote did not put in an appearance as early as I had expected, so that I was not hampered in my efforts at learning French.

You may think that the servant problem is bad in America. Well, so it is bad in America, but you just ought to see the pitiful tyranny under which Mme. Lalot is groaning. Her "Marie" is afflicted with moods. One day she is "charmante," and the next day she is horrid.<sup>26</sup> She was particularly horrid during the latter portion of my stay. It seems that Mme. Lalot has occasionally taken her to the Cirque or to the movies, and that she became horribly jealous at the frequency with which Mme. Lalot went with me to the theatre. The last time we went (to a matinée at the Odéon) we had to walk around the block in order to conceal our destination from Marie who was thought to be watching from the window!

On Tuesday afternoon, I accompanied Mme. Lalot on one of her visits to a hospital where she takes delicacies to the wounded soldiers. At the hospital that we visited, many of the men were convalescent, so that not a very great many stayed in the wards on a beautiful afternoon. However, the hospital is an immense place; the number of men that we saw was small proportionately rather than absolutely. In one of the wards a big negro (it seems queer to hear them talking French) was trying his wooden leg for the first time. He (and everybody else) seemed to regard it as great fun. After leaving the hospital we visited a poor family, and then went home to dinner.

During my two weeks in Paris I have taken a perfect debauch of going to the theatre. I shall not attempt to give you a catalogue of all the plays that I have seen. During last week I took Mme. Lalot a good many times. Once I had to go with her to the "Cirque," where there was an acrobatic exhibition which bored me stiff. She had complementary tickets. Taking her to the theatre was a tiresome business, since the performances finish just about in time to get

25. A "tête-à-tête" is a chat or casual conversation.

26. The word "charmante" means charming.





Behind the three soldiers and horses is a YMCA Foyer du Soldat similar to those Dr. Machen operated while at St. Mard and Missy-sur-Aisne.

*Photo courtesy of Kautz Family Collection, University of Minnesota*

people home before the métro service is stopped. After leaving her at her house, I had to run for it to get my way back here. But I had to walk only once.

Among the notable plays that I have seen were “Marion de Lorme” of Victor Hugo at the Odéon, and also at the same theatre a play of George Sand, “Le Mariage de Victoriae” and a little play of de Musset. The matinée where these two were given was preceded by a conférence.<sup>27</sup> At the “Antoine” I saw a poetic and patriotic play which is having a great success. It is called “Les butors et la Finette.” “La Finette,” the princess, represents France. “Les butors” are rough people, thought to be hopeless for their frivolity, who rally round la Finette at the out break of war. It is an elaborate performance, and in parts seemed to be quite fine. I already mentioned “Tartuffe” in my last letter. Last night at the Française I saw a modern play by Bernstein called “L’Elévation,” which represents the elevation of

27. A “conférence” is a lecture.

a man's character at the devotion called out by the war. I did not think the "elevation" was quite as high as it might have been. Most of the plays that I have seen—indeed practically all—have accorded with the standards of taste which we are accustomed on our English speaking stage. Indeed they are superior morally to many of our plays.

Yesterday afternoon I attended a great patriotic celebration in the large auditorium of the Sorbonne.<sup>28</sup> The President of the Republic was there and other notables. There were many speeches, and finally a scene from "Les butors et la Finette." Unfortunately, I did not arrive early enough and had to stand up very far from the speakers. I did not understand many of the speeches very well. But the occasion was interesting.

Yesterday I met an Abbé who was at the office of the Franco-American work looking for somebody with intellectual interests who would exchange French & English conversation with him.<sup>29</sup> When he discovered that I did not want to bother with the English, he took it very good-naturedly, and spent a good part of the afternoon (rather middle of the day) with me talking about theology & other subjects. I felt rather mean about it, but my companion seemed to be willing.

My final "permission" to go is expected daily, but if it comes to-morrow I cannot get away before Tuesday. Of course, I have enjoyed my stay in Paris. It has not been my fault that I have had to wait, and all my theatrical entertainment has been one way of learning French. There have been no more airplane raids. It is simply astounding how normal the life of the city is. Here we are only a hundred miles or less from the enemy's lines, and yet everything is going on almost as smoothly as in time of peace. Theatres are open all the week; food is plentiful, though with some restrictions (I should enjoy a Washington pie).<sup>30</sup>

I find the U. S. uniform most horribly inconvenient. One of the regulations is that all buttons must be kept buttoned. Well, when I get into my overcoat I feel as though it were a worrisome job to get all those buttons and hooks unfastened, so as to get

28. The "Sorbonne" is the University of Paris.

29. An "Abbé" is an abbot, which is the superior of a monastery.

30. Is this a cherry pie?

at the pockets of my inside coat or "blouse." Each pocket has its button which must be fastened and unfastened every time. And the pockets seem very inconvenient to the untrained civilian. Leather leggings, further more, are an awful nuisance.

For the first time in my life almost I have been oppressively warm in winter. I am warmly dressed, and nearly roasted half the time. The weather every day without exception has been warm, the temperature day after day, being almost uniform. The winter will be almost over before I get to camp. I wish I had not loaded myself down with such elaborate preparation for cold weather.

No news from home as yet. None can be expected, probably, for another week. In the midst of all delays in mail, I hope that you for your part will always bear in mind the fundamental fact that no news is good news.

You don't know how much love goes with this letter to you and all the folks at home.

Your loving son,  
J. Gresham Machen

HOTEL BEAULIEU  
8, RUE BALZAC

CHAMPS-ÉLYSÉES - PARIS  
DESPOUYS, PROPRIÉTAIRE

Address:-  
Care of American Y. M. C. A.,  
12 Rue d'Assolant  
Paris

January 29, 1918

My dearest Mother:

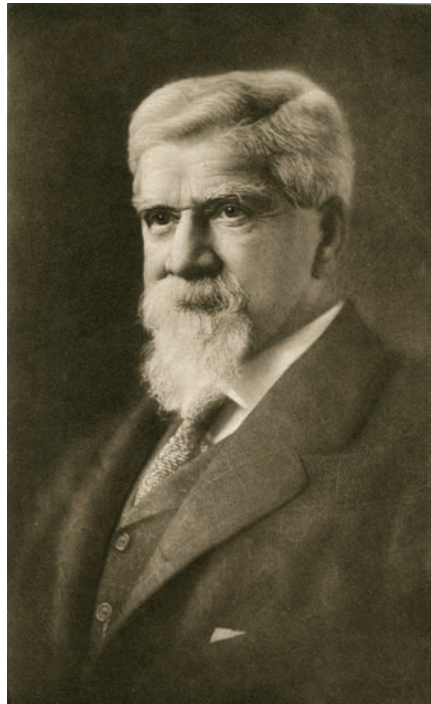
It seems a long time since I wrote to you from the steamer, and I am afraid it will seem longer still before the present letter arrives. Mail, it is now known, especially in account of the censorship, is necessarily very irregular. It is really hardly worth while for me to begin expecting anything from home just yet, but I shall enquire this afternoon when I go to the Y. M. C. A. office, whether they have any news to hear from you and all of those at home.

After passing through the submarine zone without the slightest incident on the part of anybody, so far as I could see, we arrived at the mouth of the ~~river~~ <sup>river</sup> on Friday afternoon. The passage of the bar, which in account of thick weather conditions was out of sight of land, was rather curious. On account of comparatively shallow water the ocean swell became remarkably regular and powerful. The great waves really looked some about an eighth of a mile long and yet quite steep at the crest. When they caught the vessel sideways they made her roll fully as steep (though not as quickly) as in the stormiest weather that we had had in mid-ocean. The weather was fair and beautiful, the fog-banks only adding to the beauty of the scene.

Soon after his arrival in Paris, Dr. Machen wrote this letter to his mother, January 29, 1918, telling her more about his sea journey from home and passing through "the submarine zone."



J. Gresham Machen's mother,  
Mary Gresham Machen  
(1849–1931).



J. Gresham Machen's father,  
Arthur W. Machen (1827–1915).

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