

Writing about Joseph Byers

There are very few things we know about Joseph Byers.

He was born in Scotland but we don't know exactly when or where. It might have been 1898 or it might have been earlier. Joseph volunteered on 20th November 1914, in one of the first great patriotic waves of many in the early months of the war that was supposed to last until Christmas. He was a member of the 1st Royal Scots Fusiliers, number 15576, arriving in France on 3 December 1914 as a reinforcement. On 8th January, Joseph went off to fetch coal and never returned. He was caught soon after and tried by General Court Martial on 30 January. He was undefended at his trial and pleaded guilty to the charge of attempted desertion, which carried the death penalty. Joseph Byers was executed on 6th February 1915.

There are no letters, no diaries. The army records for Joseph Byers were destroyed by bombing in Second World War. Despite the work of many historians, journalists and a genealogist employed by the National Theatre of Scotland, no family member has ever been located.

The only document that we have is Joseph's will. It's in the National Archives of Scotland and I've a photocopy of it. It reads simply: 'In the event of my Death I give the whole of my stuff to my Sister Nellie Murray'.

With so little documentary evidence how is it possible to write about Joseph Byers?

I started by reading a lot of books about the First World War. History books, poetry books, novels, books of letters. There was almost a hundred per cent literacy in 1914, everyone could write and they did so profusely.

Next I examined what evidence there was of the trials themselves. The Court Martials were ad hoc and often on the field of battle, they were not transcribed by a court reporter and anyway, again, a lot of the paper work has been lost or destroyed. It was possible to piece together the trials of some men – such as Lance Sergeant Willie Stones – but as Joseph pleaded guilty, no evidence was submitted.

There is very little testimony by the condemned men themselves. Many were too ashamed to write a letter home. Others had to ask a priest or their guard to write a letter for them because they did not feel capable of writing that last missive themselves. Some were drunk on their last night. All of them were given less than twenty-four hours notice of their execution. The remaining letters are hastily written goodbyes, full of sorrow and shame and apologies for what they had done.

But who was Joseph Byers?

As I do when I'm writing any play, whether it's based on historical fact or completely fictional, I began with a list of questions. Even within the horrifyingly short time between when Joseph joined up and was executed, there were some obvious lines of enquiry.

Firstly, why did he join up? What did he imagine being a soldier would be like? Did he have pals who were in the army already and was he worried about being left behind?

There could have been a myriad of reasons, all of which would shed light on his character.

In 1914, abroad really was abroad. Very few young men of Joseph Byers age would have travelled across the UK let alone to a foreign country. So how would it have felt to sail to France on a boat for the very first time? I'm fascinated by the everyday, by the banal, as it's these little details that often tell us the most.

Of course, the central question of Joseph's life – and my play – is why did he run away? He had been a soldier for barely a month. Was he scared? Bored? Fed up? Lonely? And once he was caught, why did he plead guilty? Did he not understand he had committed a capital crime and a guilty plea was tantamount to suicide?

My play is not an apology for Joseph Byers. It is rather an imaginative defence, a defence that he and many of the other executed men never received in life and are long overdue. Myself and composer Gareth Williams have *imagined* Joseph Byers in the hope that while his name may not be on any memorial, in our story and songs he can live and be remembered.

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