

NEWS

Jon's book traces epic journey from Wigan to Canada

William's family history inspires a tale from the pit to the frontline

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Author Jon Moorthorpe was 10 years old when he first heard about the ultimate sacrifice his great-uncle made on a battlefield.

But it was only five years ago, at the age of 74, when Jon began to research his family history to tell the story of William Gregory, a collier who grew up in Aspull and later emigrated to Canada before returning to fight in the outbreak of World War One.

And now a new historical novel, *Argyll Street*, follows William's life from the Wigan pits to the front line.

Jon, who now lives in East Sussex, said: "My sisters and I often mentioned the stories that mum told us about her uncle which had very little information, just that he had gone to Canada in 1906 and returned to the front line in the Canadian regiment, 25th Battalion Nova Scotia in 1916."

The unit became part of the 5th Infantry Brigade which distinguished itself at the Battle of Hill 70 in 1917, where William was killed in action.

The battle for the hill took place on the outskirts of Lens in France and was fought by Canadians.

It was the first time Canadian troops were led by a



Jon Moorthorpe and, inset, with his new book. Right: William Gregory and, below, the Gregory family in 1916



Canadian commander, Sir Arthur Currie, who had been told to attack the Germans in the city but instead he insisted the men should attack higher ground to keep German soldiers from getting to Belgium.

His victory led to German forces losing over 25,000 men during the battle.

It was Jon's sister Margaret who found a picture of a woman at William's grave in the Aix-Noulette Communal Cemetery, Pas-de-Calais, France.

She had conducted the family research as much as she could.

Jon said: "It was the first

hint we had of where William was buried and only in 2016, I eventually visited his grave. It felt very emotional."

Jon continued: "We have very little knowledge since the early 1900s and very few people left."

"We pieced together a few facts and then followed up with research in France and eventually put together the story, which resulted in *Argyll Street*."

Jon wanted his novel to concentrate on the affect the war had on the ordinary soldier and their relationships both with their families and their comrades in arms.

He said: "So many histories concentrate on the development of the war and the roles the generals play but there's little attention paid to the families and the important role of the common private soldier."

Having worked as a reporter for a local newspaper at the age of 14, Jon only began writing books in 2014 because he had led such a busy life.

He joined the army before serving in the Coldstream Guards for 15 years, followed by a long career of over 30 years in the AeroSpace Defence Industries.

He decided to practise writing first so he wrote and self-published a couple of

short stories including *The Gregory Journal* and *Migrating Geese: An Anthology of Short Stories*.

Jon said: "That's when I started to research William's life story and it kept me occupied over the last five years."

William Gregory was born in March 1879 and at the age of 10, he went to work in the mines with his father.

In the 1800s children as young as five could be found working underground in the pit holding candles.

Jon said: "Young people today wouldn't realise what children went through or how they were brought up."

"The Mining Act in 1842 banned girls from going down the pit and only allowed boys from the age of 10, but the girls were still sent because parents were dependent on the money, so they used to dress them as boys."

William Gregory later married Elizabeth in 1903 and shortly afterwards they had two children, Ellen and John.

As William set sail for Canada in 1906, Elizabeth joined him 12 months later with their children.

Jon said: "Imagine a young wife leaving her mother and travelling all the way to Canada with two babies, it must have been an incredible

thing."

The author will now continue to try and trace all the surviving relatives in Canada and is in touch with a Canadian descendant of William, Sister Georgette Gregory.

He said: "Everyone is standing by. All my family here in the UK and friends overseas are relying on me to feed them with information."

"It's been five years of hard work to get to where we are now."

"For some family members, it's the first time they have been aware of the family routes and of course they want to know more."

Since the book launch, Jon said the response has been very encouraging and those who have taken up the book have said that they couldn't put it down.

He was recently asked how much of the book is fact and how much is fiction but he says he won't tell.

He said: "I describe the book as a historical novel because there are quite a lot of historical facts in the book."

"I guess even in lots of real history not all of it is factual but it's been a very enjoyable journey."

Argyll Street is available through internet booksellers and all good bookshops.

