

Elsie Reford

By Alexander Reford

Elsie Reford spent much of the First World War in London, England to be near her eldest son Bruce, who left university at the outbreak of the war to join the British Army. Because of the danger of travel, Elsie Reford was marooned in England for much of the First World War. While in the British capital, she volunteered at the War Office, putting her knowledge of German to work to translate documents into English for the General Staff. She also volunteered with the Canadian Red Cross.



She was so deeply affected by the war, although her son had survived after being wounded in action, that on her return to Canada she gave speeches to the Women's Canadian Club. She and Julia Drummond had formed this club in 1907 to bring together Montreal women – until then divided by language, geography, politics, and religion – as well as to provide women with an opportunity to participate in the political and social debates of the era. Speaking in Montreal, Ottawa, Belleville, and Quebec City, Elsie Reford on each occasion highlighted the extraordinary sacrifices being made by the British people and called on Canadians to enlist despite two years of debate on whether conscription was necessary or appropriate.

With the passage of time and without care, I believe we are doomed to forget.

Elsie Reford made a study of remembrance; shortly after hostilities ended, she embarked on a pilgrimage to the battlefields of France and through the battered towns of Belgium. This was her way of honouring the memory of the men she had known who did not return. Her son Bruce was wounded, but among the fortunate who survived.

Elsie tended memory, much as she tended to her garden. She kept her wartime correspondence her entire life, a keepsake of a lost world.”

Viveka Melki, [Warflowers](#)

The First World War was a family affair.

- Her husband's shipping agency, the Robert Reford Company, moved troops, horses, munitions and supplies from the port of Montreal to the United Kingdom and to the Imperial Russian Army.
- Her brother-in-law, Dr. Lewis Reford, was the surgeon who amputated Georges Vanier's leg at the No. 3 Canadian General Hospital (McGill).
- Another brother-in-law, William Hew Clark-Kennedy, was one of 71 Canadians to be awarded the Victoria Cross for bravery in the war.

- Her brother, Frank Meighen, was a key figure in recruiting men to join the war effort as the commanding officer of the Royal Montreal Regiment.
- One cousin, George Stephen Cantlie, was the commanding officer of the Black Watch of Montreal.
- Another cousin, Arthur Meighen, was the architect of the 1917 Military Service Act that introduced conscription for men between the ages of 20 and 45.

Sources:

Elsie's Paradise, Alexander Reford, 2004

Treasures of the Reford Gardens, Alexander Reford, 2006

Elsie Reford : la grande dame des Jardins de Métis, Hélène Jasmin, 2015

Articles by historian Karine Hébert

Elsie Reford-focussed documentaries on *CBC Ideas* and *Aujourd'hui l'histoire* on Radio-Canada.