

Corps Mystery

WORKING AS A BOOKPLATE VOLUNTEER at UBC Rare Books and Special Collections is typically a simple affair: we digitize a collection of 19th-century bookplates and attempt to identify the owner. However, we sometimes come across stories that can't be captured in the simple meta-data we include in our descriptions. The mystery of Thomas Langton is one such story.

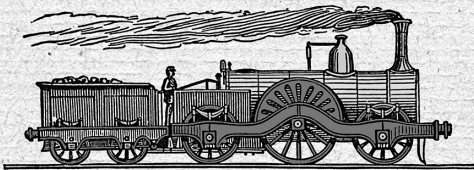
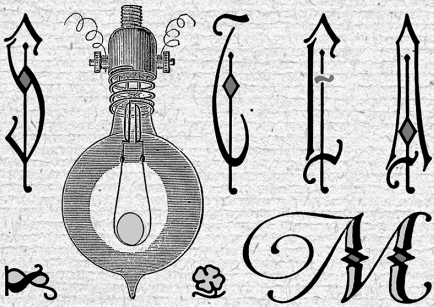
I didn't have much to go on, just a name and a heraldic bookplate. Born in Yorkshire, Langton chose arms for his bookplate that express unwavering loyalty. The crest is a double-headed eagle, typically associated with empire, with a trefoil on its breast. This charge and the triple chevron have appeared throughout the history of the Langton arms and are likely family vestiges, along with the vair pattern and trefoil. The supporting plants on either side of the shield only appear in the exact shield that Thomas Langton used. Although it is unusual to see plants as supports, perhaps this shield represents the family's trade at the time.

Hoping to learn who Langton was, I found two attestation papers from the First World War that drew my attention away from the bookplate and towards an altogether greater mystery. In a list of various Thomas Langtons, two stood out. Their recruitment documents were strikingly similar except for an unusual discrepancy: the birthdate. One stated June 23, 1872, while the other gave June 23, 1869. Thinking it an unlikely coincidence that two men of the same name would have such similar birthdays, I compared the documents. The first of the papers, signed March 9, 1916, was filed in Quebec, while the second, dated January 29, 1917, was filed in Ottawa. By scanning the rest of the information, such as birthplace and trade, and by comparing the signatures at the bottom, I confirmed that these two men were in fact the same Thomas Langton.

I immediately assumed this was a case of someone fudging his birthdate (and maybe other

Dingbats

ORNAMENTS & *fanciful initials*



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facts) to aid his chance of joining the war effort, not an uncommon story. Yet this didn't appear to be the case. It turned out Langton had made himself older on the second document, from 44 years old in 1916 to 48 years old in 1917. Was he in fact trying to avoid conscription by modifying his age?

This doesn't appear to be the case either. The Military Service Act wasn't introduced in Canada until August 29, 1917, months after Langton's second enlistment attempt. So why then did he change his birthdate?

A three-year discrepancy is rather significant—and unlikely. Ultimately, there are any number of reasons why Langton might have changed his age. Perhaps

in the first attestation he was trying to appear younger, but by 1917, he realized the forces were so desperate for able-bodied men that they would take an older man and registered with his real age. Conversely, after the horrors of 1916, Langton might have realized conscription was imminent and hoped he could get a gentler placement by volunteering, especially as a man who would fall above the 45-year cap of the coming compulsory service. We are unlikely to ever know why Langton made this change.

After his two enlistment attempts, Langton eventually did work for the war effort, but not on the front lines. A blog post last year, "Monday Monuments and Memorials," featured a Private Thomas Langton matching the description of the

above attestation papers. He had joined up with the Canadian Forestry Corps, which supplied lumber for the war effort in the United Kingdom and France. Despite the mystery regarding his shifting birthdate, the article reported that Langton lived a long life and was buried at the national cemetery in Ottawa in June 1971 at the advanced age of 102. Or was he in fact 99?

Regardless, both Langton's bookplate and his con-

tinued effort to enlist during the Great War demonstrate admirable patriotism, and I am grateful for his service to our country.

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~ Alexis Fladmark is a Master of Library and Information Studies student in the iSchool at the University of British Columbia.

The Rare Books and Special Collections Bookplate Collection can be accessed from the UBC Library Digital Collections and Services site, <http://digitalcollections.library.ubc.ca>.

