

# The Silver Prayer Book

By Phyllis Reeve



WHEN MY UNCLE CHARLIE WENT off to the First World War with the First New Zealand Expeditionary Force, D Company, 37<sup>th</sup> Reinforcement, the ladies of his hometown gave him a bag with a brush and comb and a tablet of Lifebuoy soap.

His cleanliness thus ensured, his little sisters encouraged his godliness by presenting him with a silver-shielded prayer book, tiny enough to fit in a corner of his breast pocket, powerful enough, perhaps, to deflect a bullet.

Within the challenging confines of 2 1/8 inches by 1 3/4 inches, the half-inch-thick volume compresses the major sections of *The Book of Common Prayer, and Administration of the Holy Communion According to the Use of the Church of England; together with the Psalter...*, leaving out such non-life-saving features as “The Prefaces, Portions of the Calendar, Some of the Occasional Services and the Articles of Religion.” The Order of Publick Baptism of Infants and the Form of Solemnization of Matrimony are included, but not the Burial Service. Horace Hart, printer to Oxford University, gave the book 688 pages of clear and readable text in economically narrow margins, a black leather binding, gilt edges and gilt-stamped spine—and a front cover of sterling silver.

The silver plaque exactly fits the basic leather cover, making a solid little package of spiritual protection to carry over a soldier’s heart. The same heart might well be melted by the detailed ornamentation, a great deal for so tiny a platform. Repoussé guardian angels borrowed from Joshua Reynolds’ famous painting of 1787 keep watch, encircled by a decorative wreath.

Uncle Charlie’s prayer book, while hardly ostentatious, displays its hallmarks centrally above the angels’ heads’, emanating from fine strokes like



a little shower of inspiration, declaration by Heaven itself that the silver is true sterling, worked by the silversmiths Levi and Salaman of Birmingham in 1904. Angels and hallmarks are both enclosed in the oval wreath of curlicues, with a breath of space on top, bottom and outer margin, but nestling close to the spine.

Publishers and silversmiths apparently worked separately but to standard sizes, allowing for mixing and matching. Another prayer book from Oxford, almost identical to this one, carries leafy sprays and flowers instead of the angels, who, however, appear on a prayer book Eyre and Spottiswoode produced, with fewer pages and a different year and hallmark.

Charlie’s family shared an obsession with all things heraldic or emblematic. Above the flyleaf inscription in regular ink “From your Loving Sisters Beatrice and Helena,” my aunts gave him his own hallmark in red: a capital P, the surname initial, within an equilateral triangle.

Uncle Charlie celebrated his 20th birthday in January 1918, and received his long-awaited orders to proceed to camp preparatory to embarking. The girls, aged 13 and 15, could not have afforded more than a few shillings at a shop in Hokitika, where the family lived. Today, however, miniature prayer books similar to the one they gave their brother are advertised on the Internet for up to US\$300. Perhaps the girls gave it a similar value in their own day; when the war ended, the prayer book returned to them and it was kept safe with other books and talismans of their brother when he set out on further adventures in the Solomon Islands and Fiji.

~ Phyllis Reeve is a frequent contributor to Amphora. She lives on Gabriola Island, B.C.