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From Belgium to Broadway

Arlene Doucette

A button arrived in the mail at the Canadian War Museum one day, as artifacts sometimes do. With it was a note from the sender, on behalf of the estate of Raymond Massey, expressing apologies for not knowing anything about its background beyond what was on the label in the box, obviously written many years ago: "General Sir David Watson cut this button off the tunic of the first German prisoner taken by the Canadians at Ypres, in the Great War and gave it to Lucile Watson." Contained in a small presentation box, the button is brass, bears the double-headed eagle of Imperial Germany, and is physically indistinguishable from the millions like it that adorned the uniforms of the German Army in the First World War. Sometimes small artifacts have big stories behind them, and this small button's post-war journey demonstrates the far-reaching impact of the war on peoples' lives. But how

Abstract: A button found amongst the possessions of the late Raymond Massey was donated by his estate to the Canadian War Museum in 2009. Unfortunately, the donor was not able to provide any provenance and did not know how Massey came to own this piece of history. The button, which was taken at Ypres as a battlefield souvenir from an unknown German soldier's uniform, has touched the lives of a prominent general and two gifted and prolific Canadian actors before coming to be in the care of the museum. Its story reveals the intersection of lives touched by the war.

did it get from a German soldier's tunic to Raymond Massey, and why?

The note on the button's box tells us that our story begins at Ypres with David Watson, who began the war as a lieutenant-colonel commanding the 2nd Canadian Infantry Battalion. The 2nd Battalion entered its first sustained battle at Ypres on 22 April 1915, the first day of what became known as the Second Battle of Ypres.

Early in the morning of 23 April, as the Canadians dug into the area around the captured Kitchener's Wood, Lieutenant-Colonel Watson reported to Brigadier-General Richard Turner, commander of the 3rd Canadian Brigade. Turner sent Watson's 2nd Battalion to support a counterattack by the 10th and 16th battalions through Kitchener's Wood to the north. No.2 Company succeeded in digging in on the 16th Battalion's right flank, and it was a platoon of this company that likely deserves the credit for bringing us our button. The 2nd Battalion history makes note of the first prisoner taken in this action:

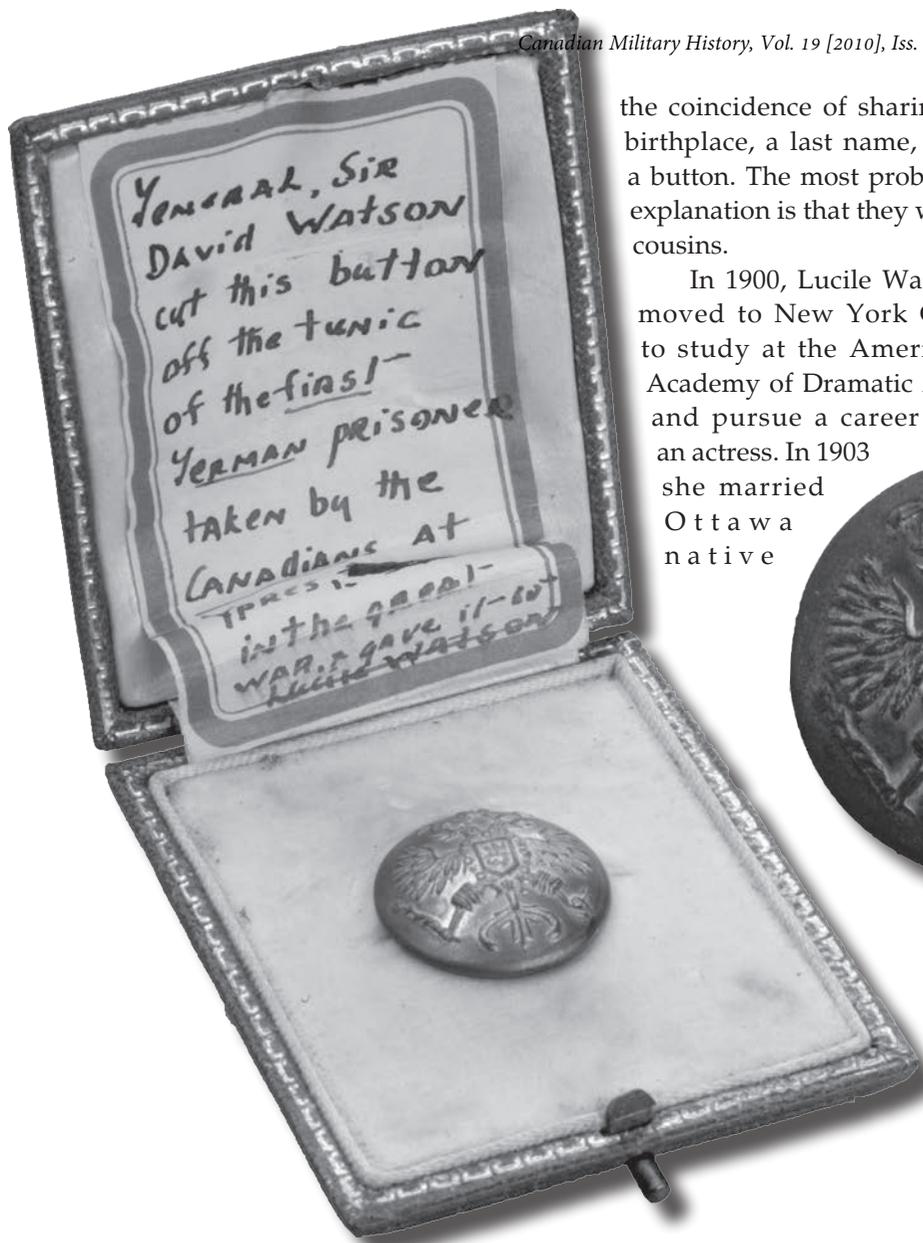
The ground was broken and from time to time halts were called to allow stragglers to overtake the main body and to secure re-alignment. It was during one of these stops that contact was established with the enemy. A scout of No.5 Platoon had sidled cautiously through a hedge and immediately stumbled on a small trench held by the Germans. His cry of alarm brought his comrades

forward with a rush. A short, sharp fight ensued in which a number of the enemy were killed and one prisoner taken. Others escaped in the darkness.¹

Having captured this enemy trench and achieved their purpose, the company dug in. Although no further mention of the prisoner is made in the unit history, one can assume that he was sent back through the lines, moving from company to battalion headquarters before being sent to the rear, or perhaps he did not survive the dangerous trip, falling prey to the stray shelling or small arms fire. At some point either Watson, who had been back at battalion headquarters, or one of his men, took one of the German's buttons as a souvenir to mark the auspicious occasion.

Major-General Sir David Watson, as he had become by the end of the

Résumé : En 2009, un membre de la succession du regretté Raymond Massey remit au Musée canadien de la guerre un bouton trouvé dans ses possessions. Malheureusement, le donateur ne fut pas en mesure d'en fournir la provenance exacte et ne savait pas du tout comment Massey avait pu acquérir ce morceau d'histoire. Le bouton, recueilli sur l'uniforme d'un soldat allemand inconnu, après la bataille d'Ypres, avait un lien avec la vie d'un éminent général et celle de deux acteurs, doués et prolifiques, avant de se retrouver confié aux soins d'un musée. Son histoire illustre comment des vies peuvent se recouper sous les effets de la guerre.



war, returned to Canada in 1919, but the war had taken its toll on his health and he died in 1922. Presumably, Watson passed his souvenir button on to Lucile Watson as indicated by the note on the button's box, having felt it was an important piece of history. The relationship between David and Lucile remains unclear. The two were born in Quebec City ten years apart, 1869 and 1879 respectively, but a search of census records proved fruitless in determining their connection.² She lived in Ottawa for 18 years, until moving to New York at the age of 21.³ Despite the questions raised by the official records and secondary source biographies, the relationship between the two must have gone beyond

the coincidence of sharing a birthplace, a last name, and a button. The most probable explanation is that they were cousins.

In 1900, Lucile Watson moved to New York City to study at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts and pursue a career as an actress. In 1903 she married Ottawa native



This box, containing a button from the uniform of captured German soldier was originally presented to Lieutenant-Colonel David Watson. He presented it to Lucile Watson but it eventually ended up in the collection of the Canadian War Museum after being donated by the estate of Raymond Massey.

and fellow actor, Rockcliffe Fellowes,⁴ to whom she remained married for 25 years before the couple divorced.⁵ Lucile Watson's acting career spanned over 50 years, included 52 Broadway productions, 34 motion pictures, various television roles, and earned accolades including an Academy Award nomination for Best Supporting Actress for her role in *Watch on the Rhine* (1943).⁶ "In her

time and in her generation," observed one film historian, "Lucile Watson was one of the grandest grand ladies in Hollywood."⁷

Perhaps David Watson gave the German soldier's button to Lucile because of her personal connections to the military. Her father had been an officer in the British Army and had a long military career, including coming out of retirement for service in the North West Rebellion while she was a still a child.⁸ Her first husband, Rockcliffe Fellowes, had served for two years with the Governor General's Foot Guards before volunteering for the

Canadian Expeditionary Force (Siberia). In September 1919, while en route to Vladivostok, aboard the *Empress of Japan*, Fellowes and two shipmates produced a small theatrical piece to entertain the officers' mess – and one of these shipmates was Raymond Massey. Massey later wrote: "Cliff Fellowes had quite a standing as a leading man in what was then a budding Hollywood. He was also married to a well-known actress, Lucile Watson, whose brother, Major-General Sir David Watson, was commanding the 4th Canadian Division."⁹ As it turns out, Massey was incorrect about the Watsons being siblings. His error nevertheless indicates that they shared a strong enough familial connection that an outsider mistook them as siblings.

Although we cannot say for certain the details of how Raymond and Lucile came to know each other and how the button came to be in Raymond's possession (she receives only a brief mention in his second autobiography), we do know that even without Massey having met her



Lieutenant-Colonel David Watson, photographed on the Ypres battlefield during the time he commanded the 2nd Canadian Infantry Battalion.

husband on a troop ship to Siberia, the two had plenty in common. Both were expatriate Canadians who became notable actors in both film and theatre, with dozens of productions to their credit, and they shared the distinction of receiving Academy Award nominations (Massey was nominated for Best Actor in 1940 for his role as Abraham Lincoln in *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*). Although Watson and Massey never appeared in a production together, they were both active on Broadway throughout the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. In 1939, Massey and Watson appeared on Broadway at the same time, in different shows but in theatres that backed onto one another (the Plymouth and the Broadhurst). The two actors may also have crossed paths as a result of their political interests, as both are described in their biographies as political conservatives.¹⁰

None of these commonalities offer any explanation as to why Lucile would have given to Raymond a

button cut off of a German prisoner's uniform in the First World War. Perhaps Raymond's experiences prior to becoming an actor prompted Lucile to give him the button.

Raymond Massey was the second son of the esteemed Massey family of Toronto and the younger brother of Charles Vincent Massey. His first career was soldiering, entering into the Canadian Officers' Training Corps at Victoria College at the University of Toronto in 1914. Frustrated with the slow pace of progress there, he finagled a commission as a lieutenant in the 9th Battery of the Canadian Field Artillery (CFA) early in 1915, and by January 1916 he found himself in France.¹¹ The next stop was Belgium, where he was assigned to the 13th Battery, 4th Brigade, CFA in the Ploegsteert area, "where some of the heaviest fighting had raged in the first and second battles of Ypres in 1914 and 1915."¹² He survived some very heavy fighting in France and Belgium but was listed as shell shocked after Mont Sorrel and was

evacuated to Canada in August 1916, with no memory of the battle or the two weeks that followed it.¹³ He recovered enough to return to duty a year later, first as a gunnery instructor at Yale University, and then in 1918 as a member of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (Siberia). On this expedition, in the company of Lucile Watson's husband, Massey was bitten by the acting "bug" which set him on course for a long and outstanding career as an actor.

The German soldier's button must have seemed to Lucile Watson an appropriate gift to give to a veteran of the Ypres battlefields – perhaps she thought he would keep it safe and have an appreciation for its story. He did indeed keep it safe, and after he passed away in 1983, his estate continued guardianship for another 26 years before passing it into the care of the Canadian War Museum.

We will never know the precise circumstances under which this button traded hands. It is a relic of



Lieutenant Raymond Massey, photographed during the First World War.

one of Canada's most famous battles of the First World War, but its significance goes beyond the circumstances of its capture. As an artifact, it serves as a reminder that the impact of the war went well beyond the battlefields to reach the most unlikely places, long after the guns had been silenced.

Notes

1. Colonel W.W. Murray, *The History of the 2nd Canadian Battalion in the Great War 1914-1919* (Ottawa: Mortimer Ltd., 1947), p.40.
2. David Watson appears in the 1911 Census along with his wife and three daughters. Neither David nor his parents or sister appear in any previous census records. Lucile appears in the 1881 Census as the two-year-old daughter of Thomas C. Watson, living in Ottawa (her mother had died in 1889). Lucile also appears in the registry of baptisms from the Quebec Cathedrale Anglicane, born 27 May 1879, daughter of Thomas Charles Watson, Secretary Treasurer of North Shore Railway, and Leila Elizabeth (née Morlet).
3. "Lucile Watson, Actress, Dead; Noted for Her Dowager Roles," *New York Times*, 25 June 1962.
4. Attestation Paper, Canadian Overseas Expeditionary Force, for Rockcliffe Fellowes, dated 27 Sept. 1918. <www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/databases/cef/001042-119.02-e.php?image_url=http://data2.archives.ca/cef/gpc003/321963a.gif&id_nbr=381652>.
5. "Former Star of the Movies Rockcliffe Fellowes Passes," *Ottawa Citizen*, 31 January 1950, p.29.
6. Classic Images, "Lucile Watson: Grande Mother," by T.R. Bourgeois. <www.classicimages.com/past_issues/view/?x=/1998/october98/watsonlucile.html> (accessed 15 April 2010).
7. Axel Nissen, *Actresses of a Certain Character: Forty Familiar Hollywood Faces from the Thirties to the Fifties* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2006), p.202.
8. During the North West Rebellion, Major T. Charles Watson, a British Army veteran, was sent to Yorkton, Assiniboyia, to organize the settlers of the York Farmers' Colonization Company for local defence. They constructed a fort that "appears to be the most elaborate military installation built from the ground up during the Riel Uprising," and named it Fort Watson in his honour. (Thérèse Lefebvre Prince, "Yorkton's Fort Watson," *Folklore Magazine*, Spring 2010)
9. Raymond Massey, *When I Was Young* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1977), p.203.
10. Biography for Lucile Watson, Internet Movie Database.com, <www.imdb.com/name/nm0914778/bio>, and Raymond Massey entry on Wikipedia, <en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raymond_Massey>, both accessed 29 July 2009.
11. Massey, p.106.
12. Massey, p.122.
13. Massey, p.184.

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