Margery Spring Rice

Pioneer of Women’s Health in the Early Twentieth Century
3. Loss (1912–1916)

Social historians suggest that in the early twentieth century, middle class parents became more aware of the benefits of fresh air, rest, play and exercise. For Margery, however, this was nothing new as she had been brought up in a family that regularly went to Aldeburgh for holidays by the sea, by a mother who loved cycling and had a strong belief in the benefits of fresh air. Margery certainly inherited this belief of Clara’s: into her old age, she was passionate about it to a fault, sometimes driving friends and family to distraction by throwing windows open even in the coldest weather, exclaiming ‘There’s a dreadful fug in here!’. She loved the sea and, for several summers when they were small, she took her children to Saunton Sands in Devon where she shared a house rented or borrowed from a friend with her sister-in-law Petica, whose two sons were born in 1911 and 1913.

Margery’s attitude to her children caused some tension with her in-laws, particularly her sister-in-law Lilian (known as Gil). In Margery’s view, the Jones family had a tendency to fuss about children and she was irritated when Gil implied that she did not fuss enough. Three letters from 1914, from Gil to Margery, survive with lengthy discussions of their different views and justifications of her own. Gil admitted that: ‘It is a good thing maiden aunts can’t run everything their own way — I do realise that’, but she nevertheless made it clear that she did not think the nurses employed by Margery were experienced enough and that the children were not kept warm enough. She pointed out that on one occasion, when Charles was

2 The house, called The Cleeve, and owned by Arthur Cardew, civil servant, pottery collector and friend of Oscar Wilde, overlooked the sand dunes of Braunton Burrows. Margery also stayed in a house in that area called Spreacombe Manor.
3 Lilian Jones, letter to Margery Spring Rice, 12 February 1914.
staying with Petica and both Charles and his cousin Martin were unwell, the doctor had suggested their room was too cold. This could hardly have been Margery’s fault, since she was not there, but perhaps Gil was trying to be tactful by being oblique. Petica herself held back: she wrote to Margery in January 1914 that when Muz had taken her to task for sitting in judgment on other people’s parenting, she had felt it to be just and learnt the lesson. What is clear is that both Charles and Isabel were delicate children, often ill, and that Margery was also determined to live a life of her own, a principle that her in-laws (in spite of their doubts) recognised and supported. In accordance with what she and Edward had agreed before their marriage, Margery sometimes took holidays without him: in early 1913, for example, she travelled with a woman friend to southern Spain.\(^4\) But when Gil wrote that if Margery could not be with her children herself, ‘which I do not think is anybody’s business except yours’, she ought to employ a good nurse, Margery read it as criticism, perhaps because, at some level, she knew that the criticism could be justified.\(^5\) Yet, although she handed over much of the day-to-day care of her children to others, she did not always find the relationship with nurses and nannies easy given her own strong views on child-rearing; and at least one left her employment owing to differences over the children’s upbringing.

However we balance the various sides in this, there is no doubt that Margery loved her children deeply. In the spring of 1914, she suffered a huge blow when Isabel died from meningitis. A letter survives from Ruth Dalton, a Labour politician and wife of Hugh Dalton,\(^6\) praising her ‘fearless clear thinking’ in the face of unimaginable grief. She goes on to say that Margery, as ‘someone so completely living up to the principles which I hold — which are so easy in theory & so agonisingly hard in practice’, is the person Ruth would choose to come to in times of trouble. In an attempt to help her recover (and leaving Charles behind in the care of a nurse, in his grandmother’s

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\(^4\) In 1912, Eileen Power commiserated with her over being criticised for going on holiday without Charles, saying that it was important for a mother to have a cultivated mind.

\(^5\) Lilian Jones, letter to Margery Spring Rice, 20 February 1914.

\(^6\) Ruth Dalton, letter to Margery Spring Rice, 6 May 1914. Ruth Dalton was briefly a Labour MP, but more importantly a long-serving member of the London County Council. Hugh was a Labour MP and post-1945 Chancellor of the Exchequer.
house in Aldeburgh), Edward took her on a walking holiday in the Alps on the Italian-Austrian border, and that was where they were on 28 June, when Archduke Ferdinand was assassinated in Sarajevo, although they had no access to news and for some time were unaware of what had happened. On 28 July, Gil wrote Margery a long letter from Switzerland, where she and her sister Hilda were on holiday, sympathising with Margery in her evident distress at a critical letter from Aunt Theo: ‘I never have and unless you alter very much never shall accuse you of not doing all you possibly can do which to the best of your belief is right & necessary for the good of your children’. Neither Gil nor Margery seems to have been in a hurry to get home, in spite of the prospect of war. Gil’s only comment in the same letter is: ‘Isn’t the prospect of a European war too horrible for words? I can’t believe that it will really happen — we shall have to cease to consider ourselves civilised at all if it does’.

Almost exactly fifty years later, one of Margery’s grandchildren recorded her telling the story of the next few weeks, so we have it in her own words. The exact timing is not always clear, and memories are bound to contain inaccuracies after that length of time, but it stands as a vivid account of what happened to her and Edward between June and August of that terrible year. They had left some luggage in Munich before crossing into Italy to go walking, intending to collect it on their planned route home through Germany, Belgium and Holland. During their exertions in the mountains, Edward began to suffer great pain from piles (in her retelling of the story, Margery remembered him as having injured his back, but in a letter to her mother-in-law of 28 July 1914 she wrote that Edward was in bed upstairs after an operation for piles). As they walked down towards Cortina, where there was an inn and they hoped to get medical help, they were stopped and questioned by four soldiers. They were allowed to go on but were alerted to there being something unusual happening. Finding a doctor in Cortina, they received the advice that they should go to the hospital in Munich; once there, Edward was operated on and Margery installed herself in a hotel.

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7 There are only a couple of letters surviving from this period, but they make it clear that Margery misremembered some of the details of what happened.
The first sign that warned her of the seriousness of the situation was that she was unable to obtain their daily copy of *The Times*. Very soon, they ran into difficulties because they did not have enough cash to pay the hotel or medical bills, so, finding she could not get money transferred from England, she went to the British consul and managed to persuade him to lend her a small sum. They did have their tickets home, and
the hotel keeper was urging them to leave, even though Edward was still convalescing. On 3 August, the day before Britain declared war on Germany, the British consul in Munich issued a passport to ‘Charles E. C. Jones, a British Subject, travelling on the Continent, accompanied by his wife Margaret’. Margery recalled ‘the frightful journey home, the train stopping at every single little station’, picking up soldiers all the way. They had to spend the night in a waiting room at Nuremberg station (about 100 miles from Munich), with Edward in great discomfort and with very little food. Continuing their journey, they reached Cologne, where an official from the American consulate was attempting to round up any Britons and Americans arriving by train. Several people who were desperate to get home, including Edward and Margery, refused to go with him but boarded the next train towards Holland. At each of the many stops, foreigners were made to alight and show everything they had with them — not much, in their case, as they had left a large trunk in the hotel in Munich: ‘there the trunk as far as I am concerned still is, with a lot of nice things in it — my clothes and Edward’s clothes’.8

After several changes of train and constant searches, which left Edward in a very weak state, they arrived in the town of Kleve, near the border. In the same situation was a family from Glasgow, a couple with their small baby and a nurse. In Kleve, two Germans who had also been in the train fell into an argument, each promising that they could get the English across the border. The Scots chose one of the two, and Edward and Margery the other, whose name was Buchbinder. However, it turned out that Buchbinder could not deliver: he tried several times to take them with him on a bus or tram across into Holland, but they were always refused entry, until eventually they gave up and returned to the hotel where they were staying where, among others, two Americans with their German courier and a Canadian doctor with his young daughter were also stranded. The courier went every day to the border town of Emmerich, ten miles away, to try to make arrangements. After a few days, he told them that he had managed to hire a ‘wagonette’ to take the group into Holland, but because Edward had remained in bed upstairs, he had not known to include his name on the list. When Margery said that she could not go without Edward, the courier expressed his

8 Margery Spring Rice, fragmentary memoirs, recorded by Sam Garrett-Jones 26 August 1965, transcribed April 1997 by Sam Garrett-Jones.
conviction that Edward’s only option was internment, since he was of fighting age.

At this point the Canadian doctor came to the rescue: having visited Edward, he suggested that the sick man should be treated as his patient. In Margery’s words: “I shall swear on my oath that you are my patient, and the Germans won’t keep you back; you’re a sick man, I’ll make you look sicker still”. And I think he put some sort of white thing on to Edward’s cheeks, and he said “you must travel in your pyjamas and your dressing gown and be wrapped up in a rug, and you will occupy the whole of one seat in the charabanc”. When the Americans were informed of the scheme, they were angry because they felt it would put the whole plan in jeopardy, and also because they thought that one person taking up a whole seat would mean discomfort for everyone else, but they were overruled by the Canadian. At the customs point all, except Edward, got out of the coach and were given permission to pass. The official insisted on getting into the coach to see Edward, who ‘played his part very well; he hardly spoke above a whisper, and so on and so forth. And then the man came back, and I heard him saying to one of his companions, “oh well, that’s all right, he’ll never fight again”. And there we were, across the frontier. And that’s the end of the story. Except that we got home to an almost weeping family. My father had been telegraphing all round Europe to know where we were. And of course we hadn’t received any of these telegrams, but we just turned up’.⁹

The eventual success of their escape from Germany was something Margery would later desperately regret.

They returned, of course, to a Britain at war. Not only Margery’s husband, but also her brothers and brother-in-law, were of fighting age, and all, apart from Douglas, who was already married and a father, were called up or were quick to enlist. Both Margery’s brother, Ronald, and Petica’s husband, Donald, joined the Army Service Corps and served on the western front. Harry enlisted in the Royal Engineers and received a commission in the East Yorkshires where he trained as a gunner. Geoffrey joined the navy; Brian Thornbury, who had been brought up like a brother to Margery, was already serving in the navy; Edward’s brother Willie was also already a serving naval officer; his brother-in-law Squire Sprigge, married to his oldest sister Ethel, was in his fifties.

⁹ Ibid.
on the outbreak of war. Margery’s dearly loved cousin Roger Gibb was asthmatic and in generally poor health, but served nevertheless in the Friends Ambulance Unit. Edward, whose sense of duty overcame the strong anti-war feeling that he shared with Margery, volunteered and re-joined his old regiment, the Warwickshires, as a signaller. By October 1914, he was writing home from a camp in Andover; he left for France in July 1915, just after the birth of their second son Ronald\(^\text{10}\) in June, an occasion on which he received a few days’ leave. Donald and Margery’s brother, Ronald, were already in France (in September, Edward was able to meet both of them there for dinner).

To return to August 1914: on their return from Munich, Margery and Edward were at Gower House in Aldeburgh, Sam and Clara’s house. Douglas, for reasons that are unclear, did not join up at the beginning of the war (he did so in 1917, when he served with the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve in west Africa), but, to Margery’s amusement, he was set on ensuring the safety of the citizens of Aldeburgh by taking charge of preparations for ‘the defence of [its] dozen miles of shingle beach’. Under the authority of the Navy League\(^\text{11}\) (rather than the coastguard), as Margery wrote to Muz on 16 August, he tried to dragoon volunteers to patrol the shore. The territorials were also involved, but were a ‘confounded nuisance’ — managing to combine apathy, impudence and inefficiency. She added that Muz was not on any account to worry about them, as ‘when the Germans do land here, — I shall have a great reserve fund of strength to draw upon, & shall be able to defend my invalid husband & helpless child with very little assistance from these gentlemen of the beach’. To his credit, Douglas could see the humour of the situation, unlike Geoffrey, who ‘quiver[ed] with indignation’ when Margery asked him what would actually happen if a German ship were to be sighted offshore at night. No official firearms were provided so it was clear that, had there been a landing, the volunteers would have been fairly helpless. The domestic comforts of the patrols were catered for by

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\(^{10}\) Ronald was named after Edward’s friend Ronald Rose, who had been killed on the western front in October 1914. Margery’s brother Ronald wrote: ‘Kate tells me it is a boy & that you had been hoping for a girl. I am sorry you have been disappointed, but you have the consolation, for what it is worth, that boys will be at a premium in this old world after the war’. Isabel’s death was still very raw. Ronald Garrett, letter to Margery Spring Rice, 3 June 1915.

\(^{11}\) Founded in 1894 to support and emphasise the importance of British naval supremacy.
‘a sculptor [who] has provided a wife, who has been commandeered to live somewhere between the lighthouse & point B. on the map,\(^\text{12}\)—in a leaky tent, with only salt water marsh & shingle round her’. Luckily, though rather to the irritation of Douglas (who believed in encouraging a serious attitude in the volunteers), the sculptor’s wife treated the whole thing as a delightful picnic. Margery also commented to Muz that the gardener at Gower House had replaced flowers with cabbages in one bed so ‘That should complete our sense of security’.\(^\text{13}\)

In June 1915, Geoffrey was wounded in the Dardanelles: Harry wrote to Margery that he was doing well in hospital in Malta, and that ‘a wound must not be too bad but it must be bad enough!’.\(^\text{14}\) Roger Gibb echoed his words, relieved that Geoffrey had been wounded seriously enough not to be able to fight again, but not seriously enough to be crippled for life. In July, Edward left for France and Harry was sent to the Dardanelles. August was a terrible month: on 9 July, Brian Thornbury was lost when his ship HMS Lynx struck a mine and was sunk off the Moray Firth, and on 31 July, when Margery was at Saunton, Sam and Clara received a telegram to say that Harry had been killed on 22\(^{nd}\) in the battle of Suvla Bay in the Dardanelles.\(^\text{15}\) Margery wrote to Muz about Harry on 4 September: ‘he so loathed the thought of dying […] he was a most awfully nice person, & even I, who have so much else to fill life out, shall feel an emptiness where he was. I am hoping at any rate that Mother & Father are finding some consolation, — for what it is worth [–] in the thought that his death has not been in vain. It is really a comfort that everybody does not share my feeling about the uselessness of all this sacrifice of life’. Three days later, she wrote again, thanking Muz for going to see Sam and Clara to offer her condolences, and adding: ‘Poor dear old Harry — I can’t get him out of my mind — the horror to him of these last few weeks must have been unspeakable’. She was relieved that in one respect, their refusal to wear mourning, she and Clara were of the same mind.

\(^{12}\) The map represented the shingle spit that runs south from Aldeburgh, dividing the River Alde from the sea, and point B was at its southern end. For a map of the area, see Figure 18 below.

\(^{13}\) Margery Spring Rice, letter to Mary Jones, 16 August 1914.

\(^{14}\) Harry Garrett, letter to Margery Spring Rice, 17 June 1915.

\(^{15}\) Two other grandchildren of Newson Garrett were killed in France in 1915, Claud Garrett Salmon and Louis Garrett Smith; two more followed in 1917, Louis’ brother Godfrey Garrett Smith and Maurice Cowell.
A letter from Sam to the Master of Pembroke College, Cambridge, after Harry’s death refers to the donation to the college of a stained-glass panel made by Harry. Unfortunately, there is no further record of this and it cannot be identified. There is, however, a stained-glass panel depicting St George and the dragon in place on what is now N staircase of the college, in the former Master’s lodge, but we have no way of knowing whether this is Harry’s.

From the beginning, Margery’s view of the war was at odds with that of her family, though Harry, who had been appalled by conditions in the Dardanelles (particularly the lack of fresh water for his men to drink) was more in sympathy with her than the rest. Remembering him in her old age, she recalled his description of ‘soldiers lapping up the small streams full of mud and filth’. He had written to her in June that, in spite of enjoying his work training gunners, he had hated the war for a long time; however he still thought that she was wrong in wanting peace at any price because ‘Something spiritual [is] at stake’. While sharing her horror at the loss of life, he had nevertheless speculated that, in a hundred years, people would look back and think it had been worth it — a sad irony from today’s point of view. For her brother Ronald, the defeat of German militarism was paramount: ‘You must change that opinion of yours that any peace is better than this war’, he wrote. Clara too was deeply patriotic, in a way that was true to her military background, and could not understand Margery’s attitude: ‘the loss of life is not as horrible as the loss of liberty’. On the other hand, as the war progressed, public opinion was moving more in the direction of Margery’s views: witness (as one example) the change in tone between Rupert Brooke’s poetry early in the war and that of Wilfred Owen towards the end. This is partly due to a change in the emotional environment as well as to the difference in temperament between the two poets and changing artistic responses to war.

Not long after Harry’s death, Sam, with more understanding of their daughter than Clara, wrote to Margery from Kilninver in Argyllshire: ‘I very much hope that a fortnight here will set us both up & enable us to

16 Margery Spring Rice, fragmentary memoirs, recorded 24 November 1968 by Sam Garrett-Jones, transcribed 12 January 2006.
17 Harry Garrett, letter to Margery Spring Rice, 17 June 1915.
18 Ronald Garrett, letter to Margery Spring Rice, 22 July 1915.
19 Clara Garrett, letter to Margery Spring Rice, 14 September 1915.
regain our equilibrium [...]. I am very glad that you wrote me so fully & candidly of your feelings about the war [...]. What is quite certain is that man (by that I mean males — I don’t include women) is a fighting animal & will so long as the world lasts fight to prevent himself being oppressed’. But even he felt that Margery was putting the comfort of the present generation above the long-term good. Harry’s letters ‘depicting so vividly the effect of the horrors of war on his sensitive nature’ forbade Sam to belittle those horrors, and yet, Sam writes:

there are things more horrible than death & even than the mental anguish which our dear boy went through — and I am perfectly certain that if he had known beforehand all that he would have to go through & how it would end he would have done exactly what he did & nobody who loved him — least of all his parents — would have wished him to do otherwise. Why? Because to do anything else would have been a dereliction of his duty.\(^{20}\)

He asks whether Margery is not filled with pride at the way young Englishmen were acting: earlier generations ‘acted according to their lights & if their lights were dim it was not their fault’. He counselled her to try not to be embittered.

Edward’s letters home from France constitute a plain and unemotional account of his life as an officer on the western front. He was no stylist, nor was he a man to easily express his feelings: there are few endearments, other than the snatches of baby talk that they habitually used to each other (he calls her ‘littol Bargee’) and messages of love to his sons. On the other hand, despite his reserve, he wrote in September 1915 that he could not bear Clara’s ‘principle of not discussing anybody’.\(^ {21}\) In this letter, he was worrying about how his mother was being looked after: he felt that some of her daughters were in danger of sacrificing their personal lives for her, and that this was not something that should be silently accepted.

Until the spring of 1916, Edward did not experience real action on the front line so he found himself able to be fairly detached about what was happening. Well aware that he might be killed, he wrote that he had got used to the idea and that Margery must not grieve too much if it were to happen. He was excited by action, but able to remain calm:

\(^ {20}\) Sam Garrett, letter to Margery Spring Rice, 12 September 1915.
\(^ {21}\) Edward Jones, letter to Margery Spring Rice, 18 September 1915.
watching a plane shelled by Archibalds,\textsuperscript{22} he describes it as coming down like a dead leaf. The flies and mosquitoes were terrible, and the horrible weather made trench conditions wet and cold. His men had not had a bath for three weeks and mostly suffered from lice. The mud was appalling: on one occasion, when a man got stuck it took an hour and a half to pull him out. When Margery sent him some bottles of ‘scent’ (perhaps eau de cologne), he found them useful for masking the smell of corpses. In the autumn of 1915, he was optimistic that the Germans might be at the end of their tether, but by 1916, he was longing for the war to end.\textsuperscript{23} Like her brothers, he felt that it was essential to defeat Germany but he agreed with Margery in disliking the exaggerated hatred of Germans that she was encountering at home. This was not an attitude prevalent among his men: at Christmas 1915, he was glad that ‘the spirit of wanting to be friendly’\textsuperscript{24} existed, even if he suspected that their main motive was personal safety. The letters contain few details of his activities, but in October 1915, he writes that he and some of his men had looted bicycle wheels from a ruined village with a view to making a handcart for moving signalling equipment around, but that, unfortunately, a lack of tools had hampered the cart’s construction.

Even if officers were as vulnerable as men, Edward’s letters do make clear the difference in their conditions: on 31 October 1915, he was able to have a bath in a copper cauldron usually used for transporting medical supplies, and he mentions a champagne lunch with his commanding officer as well as a good new year’s eve dinner in Béthune. Officers were allotted beds or mattresses on the floor, while the men had to sleep in barns. In one billet, the hostess offered a bed to their messman, but when he found out it was in the same room that she and her husband slept in, ‘he fled in terror out of the house and back to the barn!’ Edward told Muz that the only way to take life in the trenches was to treat it as a romance, which he tried to do, though at times ‘I am seized with a fit of depression & then I can only think of the horrible part of it’. He was

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\textsuperscript{22} German anti-aircraft guns.
\textsuperscript{23} He may have shared the view of Margery’s brother Ronald, who in July 1916 wrote hopefully though mistakenly to Margery ‘I think the days of the war are numbered. Before next spring we ought all to be happily at home & at peace again’. Edward Jones, letter to Margery Spring Rice, 20 October 1915; Ronald Garrett, letter to Margery Spring Rice, 8 July 1916.
\textsuperscript{24} Edward Jones, letter to Margery Spring Rice, 26 December 1916.
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afraid that he would be in ‘a devil of a funk’\textsuperscript{25} if he came under fire. He found his skill in speaking French very useful as it allowed him to have philosophical discussions with the local curé and their free-thinking interpreter. He received boxes of apples and tomatoes that were very welcome, as well as gingerbread, cheese, porridge oats and boots, and, on one occasion, foie gras. A periscope (which might have been homemade) sent by Muz proved a splendid acquisition. He asked for socks, tobacco, shirts, vests, handkerchiefs, magazines (but not books — he had plenty to read), lavatory paper (a few sheets in every letter if possible), dates, Devonshire cream (when Margery was in Saunton), figs, senna, mouth wash, envelopes, chocolate, torch batteries, gloves. It is not clear if all these requests could be fulfilled! In return, he wished he could send Margery a German entrenching spade: they are ‘nice little things, very handy for gardening’\textsuperscript{26}

Margery, meanwhile, moved between London, Aldeburgh, Sunningdale (about thirty miles from Muz at Jesmond Hill) and Saunton. In London, she usually stayed with her parents at Nottingham Place — the Brunswick Gardens house was let and later put on the market. Charles suffered from various ailments, including a tubercular gland in his neck, and both children had measles. In July 1915, she wrote to Muz from Saunton that Edward’s letters sounded cheerful, but that the thought of what he might go through on the front ‘wrings tears from my heart’. She knew the odds but was determined that neither she nor her family must allow ‘black imaginings of what the worst might bring’.\textsuperscript{27} Her happiness in the last few years would be something to look back on ‘when the days of positive emptiness arrive’. Muz’s reply to this letter expresses the closeness between them, something Margery had never achieved with Clara:

I have always known since your marriage that dearly as I love Edward and much as I think him ‘worthy’ he had a wife in every way good & noble & highminded as he is — I do think he is the best & truest man I ever knew except his own father […] He has known the joy — & so have you dear, of a perfect marriage[,] the best thing that can come to any man or any woman & as you say the memory of that happiness nothing

\textsuperscript{25} Margery Spring Rice, letter to Mary Jones, 21 August 1915.
\textsuperscript{26} Edward Jones, letter to Margery Spring Rice, 12 October 1915.
\textsuperscript{27} Margery Spring Rice, letter to Mary Jones, 23/24 July 1915.
can take from you whatever happens [...] Thank you dear for the love & happiness you have given my son & for your kindness & love shown to me always. Caring for you as I do & knowing that you love me is of such help & comfort.28

Clara tried hard, and it is difficult not to feel a little sorry for her. Writing to her ‘dearest dear child’ she pleads with her daughter:

I am so sorry for you Marjorie with all your worries & anxieties & I do appreciate the quiet way you have borne all & the resolution with which you have tackled your difficulties — turn to me when you can — you don’t know how eager & anxious I am to help you [...] I can’t bear to think of my dear hopeful daughter being miserable & looking at things in [sic] through black glasses. Remember that in spite of some misunderstandings I am still your mother who loves you dearly.29

In another (undated) letter she wrote: ‘I am deeply conscious of your great love, your real devotion — and if I ever want consolation I should turn to you’. However, there were faults on her side as well: Ronald senior recognised that ‘Dear Mum does not seem to be able to accord to her daughters (including in-laws) the same liberty of thought & action she allows to her sons, & she will keep interfering in their private affairs’.30

Margery was still in Saunton in October, wondering whether to spend the winter in London, and if so, where she would stay. Her struggle with anxiety was made worse when she was alone — something she did not normally mind. But in spite of all, ‘If anything happened to Edward now I would still be happier than if I had never married him’.31 Always more comfortable with herself when taking action than when sitting still, she was not prevented by troubles (like the children’s illnesses) from following up on an idea she had conceived with Edward’s support — that they should take up farming after the war, even though Edward would need to stay in the city at first for financial reasons. To this end, she parked the children and their nanny with grandparents and, with the help of Millicent Fawcett, apprenticed herself to Katherine Courtauld (a member of the textile family) at Elms Hall, Earls Colne,

28 Mary Jones, letter to Margery Spring Rice, 29 July 1915.
29 Clara Garrett, letter to Margery Spring Rice, 4 May 1916.
30 Ronald Garrett, letter to Margery Spring Rice, 2 March 1917.
31 Margery Spring Rice, letter to Mary Jones, 18 January 1916.
Essex. She was there when Edward wrote on 16 May 1916: ‘My own darling Bargee,/ Of course I don’t think it’s selfish of you to tell me about how you’re feeling. I can quite understand & sympathise with you. If it wasn’t for a certain amount of interest & excitement attached to being out here I should probably get just as depressed as you are’. He was impressed with how well she was coping with the long strain. In June, he wrote that he longed to see her ploughing.

Margery was on the farm when the battle of the Somme began on 1 July 1916, with the loss of 20,000 British soldiers on that first day. On 9 July, she wrote to him: ‘My darlingest darling boy. You don’t know how much I have thought & thought of you the last week & wondered, till I was sick […] where you are’. Having read in the press that the Warwickshires were in the thick of it and had sustained heavy losses, she speculated that if Edward had been in battle he must have ‘hated it all so dreadfully’ and loathed the fact that she could not take a share of the burden of horror he was enduring. ‘There’s something so terribly casual in cleaning a pig-sty or milking [a] cow or making hay when people are doing things like you a few miles away’. She recorded having a conversation with Charles, who had said that killing Germans was a naughty thing to do: ‘There are[,] you see, the elements of pacifism in him already’.

On 11 July, Margery received a telegram from Clara: ‘Bad news from War Office come up immediately Nottingham Place’. Edward had been killed a week earlier, on 4 July, before her last letter to him was written. Sometime in the days that followed, she (uncharacteristically) turned to writing poetry, producing a poem entitled *In the Hayfield* that begins:

They say that you are dead; how should I know.  
Your letter lies here at my heart, as though

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32 Katherine Courtauld’s family was of Huguenot descent. They were Unitarians and Liberals. Katherine took on the Essex estate bought for her by her father, set up and managed a mixed farm there and pioneered farming careers for women. She was a supporter of women’s suffrage. She lived with a lifelong female companion, Mary Gladstone.

33 Edward’s name is on the Thiepval memorial but he has no grave. One of his fellow soldiers, Captain Edward Briscoe, wrote to Margery on 6 July 1916 that he had buried Edward ‘in a small field and marked his grave with stones and a cross’, which is probably not too sanitised a version of the truth, as it is confirmed by Captain Albert O’Donnell, Edward’s next-in-command, in a letter to Margery of 18 July.
You too were lying with me in the hay.
I do not know; it is so far away.34

Margery had become one of thousands of war widows, but one person’s sorrow is not assuaged by the fact that other people have also suffered loss. However, as was to be the case all her life, her principal way of dealing with her grief was to throw herself into action: almost immediately after Edward’s death, she began searching for work that would channel her abundant energy. What drove her was not only pain, but rage — all her life, she remembered her anger at the condolence messages she received that assumed her pride in Edward’s sacrifice for his country, an attitude she fiercely rejected. Years later, her fury was still plainly visible to her grandchildren; it was one of the forces impelling her towards the several causes she was to pursue during the rest of her life.

The way that practicalities habitually intrude into the hugeness of grief is demonstrated by the letter Margery received from Edward’s colleague Captain Albert O’Donnell, who took over the command of the company on Edward’s death. Writing on 18 July, he follows heartfelt expressions of condolence and the assurance that Edward had died instantaneously with a request for a cheque for 112 francs to cover Edward’s debts. He also mentions that he is sending home, among other things, the ‘intrenching tool’ that Edward had thought Margery could use in the garden — this was in the possession of their son Ronald until his old age, but its present whereabouts is not known.

Margery hated the conventional though often genuine sentiments expressed in many of the letters of condolence that she received, from her brother Geoffrey among others; it may perhaps have contributed to the coolness that characterised their later relationship when he wrote:

all I can hope […] is that you may feel that Edward, in following the example of so many thousands of others[,] has not made this overwhelming sacrifice in vain. I am most certainly convinced that he has not; that he, with all the others, has helped to take the first great step towards finishing the war.35

Her siblings-in-law were more attuned to her view than Geoffrey. Edward’s brother Willie, himself serving in the navy, wrote:

34 The poem is written on a loose piece of paper, in the family archives.
35 Geoffrey Garrett, letter to Margery Spring Rice, 12 July 1917.
I wish of the two that it was I who had gone. The life of ‘frightfulness’
(little as I approve of it) is not unsuited to my temperament when there
is lots of work & no time for philosophic reflection. Anyway I know the
old chap did his duty with a certain grim & philosophic determination
which was one of his endearing characteristics.36

**Aunt Theo**, too, understood Margery better than Geoffrey did:37

I did so hope against hope that your Edward would be one of the returning
army of men […] He knew better than to believe — this way the good of
Europe lies — and yet he gave all that he had […] When will the military
monsters in all the lands have done enough damage to satisfy the people
they have done too much. When will the Civil powers […] dare to talk
of peace with reason […] When shall we B[ritish] Empire people cease
from being bumptious & selfrighteous. When will the women demand a
ceasing of this murder […] Will Edward have taught many a young man
his ideas — I wonder?38

Many of those who had known Edward knew that he had fought out of
his sense of duty and in spite of what Aunt Theo’s son Roger referred to
as his ‘hatred of war and all the warlike theories of the fighting nations’.39

Sam showed again that he understood Margery better than many of
her family; in his condolence letter to Muz he writes:

I have often said to my wife that [Edward] was exactly the sort of man
that suited Marjory. She, poor child, is very brave as one knew she would
be, but I much fear that her views on the war will make it still more hard
for her to bear his loss. We who believe in the justice of our cause & the
necessity of our joining in the war, at any rate can feel that our sacrifices
are not in vain. Marjory I fear will not have that consolation at any rate
at present. But her pluck & strength of character will carry her through
this trial.40

His letter is a kind of mirror-image of the one Margery had written to
Muz about the effect on her parents of Harry’s death.

In the days after the news of Edward’s death, Margery went to
Jesmond Hill, where the Jones family closed round her in support.

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37 Aunt Theo was to spend the last years of her life with a Quaker, Ruth Fry. Her
sympathy towards pacifism may have started in World War I.
38 Dorothea Gibb, letter to Margery Spring Rice, 12 July 1916.
40 Sam Garrett, letter to Mary Jones, 11 July 1916.
His death drew her and Muz even closer, as they clung to each other through their grief. Both were comforted in some small way by believing that Edward had been killed instantaneously and by holding on to the memory of the happiness of his marriage. Margery was also helped through the immediate shock and distress by her Girton friend, Eileen Power, who took her off for a few days’ tour to the Yorkshire abbeys, to which, as a mediaeval scholar, she was an expert guide. There must have been some comfort to be found among the Garrett family too, though there are no letters surviving between Margery and her parents from this time. There is also another gap in the extant records, shocking to today’s sensibilities though perhaps to be expected at the time: who comforted the children, particularly Charles, who was old enough to remember his father? Did Margery or anyone from either family consider how they might have been affected or what their emotional needs might be?

Friends and family alike recognised Margery’s courage and energy and her need to find work of some kind. Roger Gibb cautioned her — without success — against rushing into anything: ‘Don’t try and escape from yourself by overworking. Take it easy looking round for suitable jobs for your courageous energy to cultivate, for you and your kind are only too much wanted in the world today’. Margery was not to be persuaded to take it easy: what she looked for now, apart from deadening her own sorrow, was to make some practical contribution to a better post-war world.

41 Roger Gibb, letter to Margery Spring Rice, 12 July 1916.