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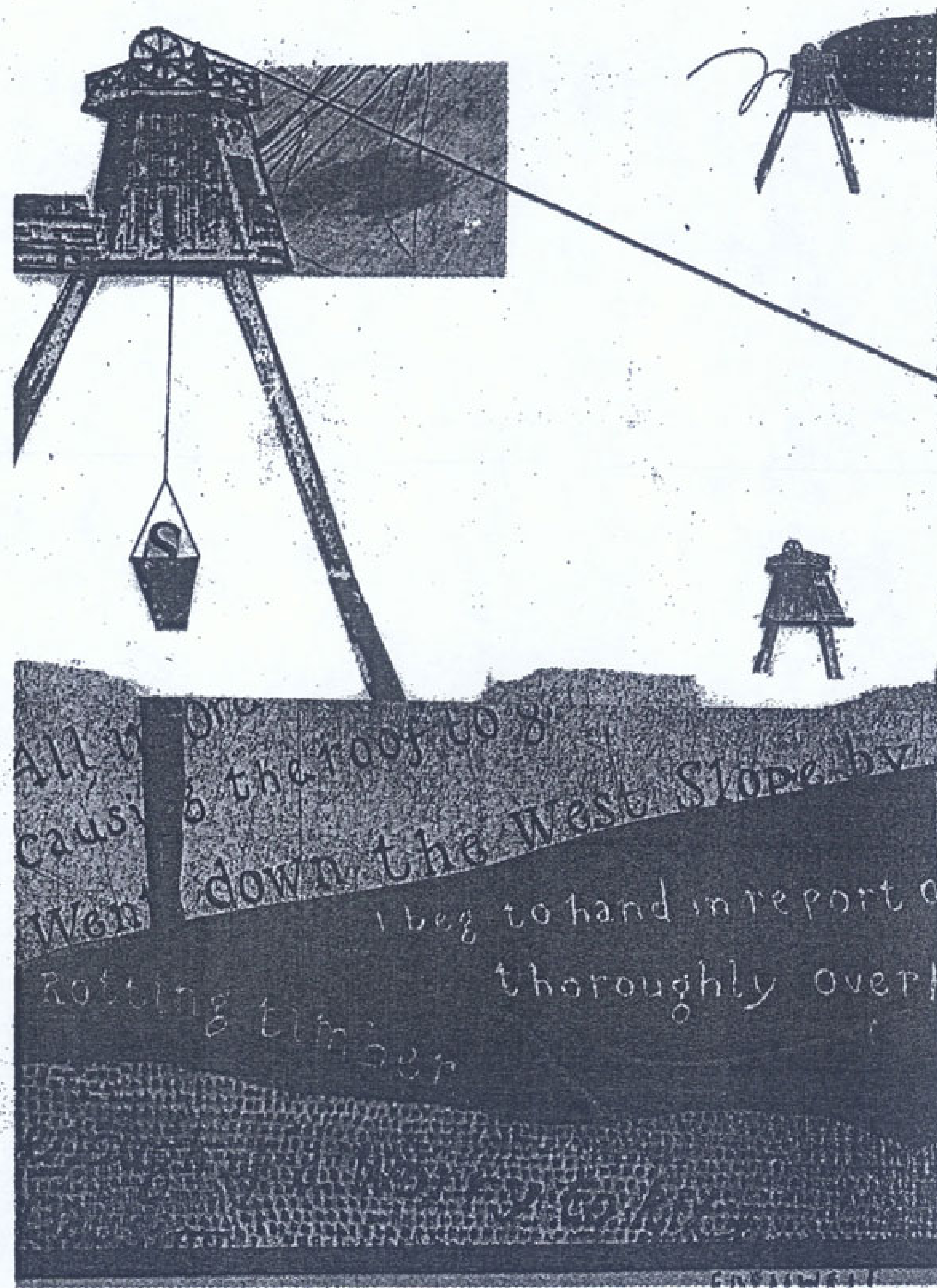
Facts & Arguments

Letters from our country's past

Much of our literary heritage is evaporating before our eyes and we are in danger of losing voices from the near and distant past. BY CHARLOTTE GRAY



NEAL CRESSWELL

Every night, when he had finished his duties as general manager of the large Springhill coal mine in Nova Scotia's Cumberland County, Henry Swift lit a coal-oil lamp, sat down at his rolltop desk and began a letter to his boss.

"Dear Sir, I beg to hand in report of day's work," he wrote on Nov. 11, 1890, in a typical missive. "Went down the West Slope by the travelling way which is being thoroughly overhauled and repaired the steam have been coming through rotting the timber and causing the roof to give way."

The Springhill mine was a tough place to work in the 1890s, as it continued to be until it was closed forever in 1958. Underground springs made the land unstable, and the miners bristled at the owners' attempts to increase production at the expense of safety.

When Henry Swift retired to the warmth of his house each evening, there was usually a catalogue of unpleasant incidents to note in his nightly letter: injured pitboys, dangerous water levels, cantankerous foremen, pockets of poisonous gas. The conscientious manager once admitted to his superiors that there was "enough of worry to kill a man."

But Henry Swift soldiered on. Day by day, Swift recorded in his letters his present achievements, his hopes for the future.

Except there was no future. On Feb. 20, 1891, Henry Swift wrote to his superior, "All in order, So far as I Know." The next day, a powerful explosion in a mineshaft killed 125 people in the worst Canadian mining disaster of the era.

Henry Swift has little to do with the Big Picture of Canadian history — the history of explorers and statesmen, lawyers and industrialists. Few people outside Cumberland County had ever heard of him. Yet Henry Swift lives on in his letters. They provide an extraordinary glimpse into the day-to-day life of a self-educated, hard-nosed 19th-century mining man — the kind of man who helped a young Dominion exploit its natural resources.

If reporters' first-hand accounts of the major events give us the rough draft of history, letter-writers provide the raw material for biographies, memoirs and historical fiction. Henry Swift was not writing for posterity, and he assumed that the only person who would read his letters was their recipient. Yet the individual particulars he recorded — his exasperation with the miners, his concern about the build-up of gas — are the details that add colour and depth to our knowledge of the past.

Letters give us the texture of daily lives: what Canadians in different periods and different regions wore or ate or read, how they buried their dead, what they thought of themselves and others, what lies and truths they chose to tell each other. In the words of Margaret Atwood, "History may intend to provide us with grand patterns and overall schemes, but without brick-by-brick, life-by-life, day-by-day foundations, it would collapse." The voices of our predecessors, preserved in fading ink on crumbling paper, contribute to those foundations.

Everyone who has ever opened up a box of old letters, in an attic or an archives, knows the extraordinary thrill of slipping folded pages out of a torn envelope, then plunging into the writer's world. Other people's correspondence can be mesmerizing. When I was in the National Archives of Canada, reading through the family letters of William Lyon Mackenzie King for a biography of his mother, Isabel, I would settle down at 9 a.m. with the first letter. When I next looked up, I was regularly startled to discover that more than two hours had slipped by. The King family's world of money worries, political ambitions and sibling tensions totally absorbed my attention.

A letter captures the unique moment at which it is written, and the unpredictable dramas of real life. I knew that Mackenzie King would realize Isabel's dreams and become Prime Minister — but as she penned all those lengthy, reproachful letters, she was worried he would become an academic rather than a politician. When researchers today study Henry Swift's plans and projections for Springhill mine in the 1890s, they have the awful, jarring knowledge that Swift would achieve none of them. Aged 42, he was among those burned to a cinder in the lethal detonation of gas and coal dust in the 1891 Springhill disaster.

Now I am compiling an anthology of Canadian letters, covering the period 1800-2000. And I realize how much of our literary heritage is evaporating before our eyes. As we move house at an ever-accelerating rate, who has the patience to sort through those old boxes of great-grandfather's letters? Who has salvaged from their parents' basement the letters written home describing the first term at university, the birth of the first child? Who bothers to print out e-mails from friends, as we individually cope with milestone events? Who writes letters any more? Who struggled to put into words on screen or paper the impact of the women's movement on their lives, or the first encounter with someone from another culture? Or the stress of being a peacekeeper in the Canadian Armed Forces?

Canadian history is not boring, and never has been. But we are in danger of losing voices from the near and distant past — voices that tell us what it was like to *be* there.

Charlotte Gray is the author of the prize-winning biographies, Mrs. King: The Life and Times of Isabel Mackenzie King *and* Sisters in the Wilderness: The Lives of Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill. *Her forthcoming* Canadians Write: The Letters Anthology *will be published by Doubleday Canada in Fall, 2003. To find out more about the anthology, or suggest letters for inclusion, go to* http://www.randomhouse.ca/letters/