



## The Great Promise

*Frederick L. Coxen*

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## **The Great Promise** Frederick L. Coxen

On August 23rd, 1914, the British Expeditionary Force's (BEF) entry into World War One against the German First Army at what would become known as the Battle of the Mons. Before the battle began, four friends serving in the Royal Field Artillery made a promise to each other: whoever survived would contact the families of those who did not, to make certain they would know what happened to their loved one. Of those four young men, only Captain Frederick G. Coxen survived.

Frederick L. Coxen's debut is a fascinating, visceral journey into the hell of war, the hearts of the men engaging in battle, and the search for closure for those left in its wake. Nearly one hundred years after the BEF's initial engagement, Captain Coxen's grandson was given his grandfather's journal—and a letter he wrote in 1945 detailing the promise that was made but never kept. With these two items in hand, his grandson begins a quest: to find the families of the fallen men and make good on the promise left so long unfinished. Interspersing sections of the grandfather's journal with key historical background the author transcends the reader beyond the historical depiction of the War, transporting them into the trenches through the experiences of one man who survived while millions of men perished. The Author goes on to describe the grandson's journey as he attempts to track down the families of the deceased in order to close the circle so long left open. The book delivers a surprise conclusion fitting for such a remarkable journey.

Historically fascinating and emotionally affecting, the author's augmentations of the grandfather's journal entries give depth and resonance to two separate paths connected by one hundred years of silence. The book is intimately descriptive and bracingly honest.

## **The Great Promise Details**

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## From Reader Review The Great Promise for online ebook

### Carol says

Primarily the diary of a WW I soldier. Mostly about the fighting and activities of the day - not one of personal stories/reflection. Would be a great read for a history student/researcher. A labor of love for the grandchild who compiled the book.

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### Penny says

#### **[Read my complete review of this book on Perpetual Chaos of a Wandering Mind](#)**

I opened this book expecting a novel constructed around the framework of Captain (then artilleryman) Frederick G. Coxen. However, I found the actual journal entries during the beginning months of World War I. They are more powerful than any novelist could fictionalize. Despite that classification, this is truly a memoir and a powerful one, not only of his experiences but his grandson's in uncovering a lost and forgotten past.

Coxen is 24 years old, senior to most of the soldiers, and educated. An electrician by trade, a previous member of the British equivalent of the National Guard since graduating from high school, Coxen served as a telephone-man, making sure the lines of communication were open between his regiment and Command. This of necessity forced him out of the trenches and into the line of fire, in some very harrowing circumstances. His commanders quickly learn to rely on his courage, tenacity and strong leadership skills. He receives a field commission and ultimately ends the war in the UK, training others the skills in which he excels.

The Great Promise opens a window onto the battlefield with a realism which conventional history books struggle to attain. Through Coxen, one glimpses the lives of the regular soldiers caught up in the fields of Flanders: their cocksure expectations and the shattering of them, the deprivations they suffered, the futility of their actions, their superhuman accomplishments and their gut-wrenching failures.

This is a soldier's journal, blunt, with no punches pulled. . . rather, I suspect he censored a great deal. However, the truths he allowed to escape his pen are graphic and disturbing. At times only the knowledge that this memoir is published by his grandson gives the reader hope. One marvels, as he did often, that Frederick Coxen managed to survive to tell these tales.

Despite his classic British stoicism, Coxen inwardly weeps for his mates, the obscene loss of life, the horrific, grizzly effects of modern technology pitted against antiquated battle strategies. His loneliness away from his wife and baby daughter makes it but once or twice onto the page. He peppers his observations with his dry British wit, but his yearning to end the madness and go home bleeds through as subtext. When the journal entries stop abruptly just when the Germans begin chemical warfare, it comes as a relief.

Rick Coxen provides excellent back story on the war, as well as commentary on his own search for his grandfather's trench mates. Unfortunately, like the war, few definitive answers are reached, but Rick's greater understanding of and connection to his grandfather makes the journey one worth taking.

**Bottom line:** This is not a historian's book or a novelist's book. One cannot call it brilliantly executed. However, it is a good book and one people should read, discuss, and share. They need to keep it on their shelves to be reminded of the horrors of war, the futility of sending millions of men to their deaths, and the up-close-and-personal we too often forget when analyzing battle strategies and politics and who assassinated whom.

**For in-depth interview of Frederick L. Coxen, visit *Perpetual Chaos of a Wandering Mind***

*FTC disclaimer: An electronic copy of this book was provided to me by the author or their agent with the understanding I would provide a fair and honest review. I receive no other compensation for this content.>*

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### **Johnny Ray says**

I was floored with the amazing quality of this work.

I really enjoyed this work and how the author took some much pains in getting the story accurate. For a historical buff there is a ton of great information here. One of the best lessons we can learn is from actual events in our past, which defines who we are as a people.

Great job in doing research, and a fantastic job in writing. Well done!

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### **Gabriel Boutros says**

(Three stars on Amazon, 2 stars on GR)

The Great Promise is a misleading title because there is little that is great, either in the "promise" of the title or in the book itself. Based on the memoirs of Frederick Coxen, the author's grandfather and a soldier with the British Expeditionary Force during World War I, this is a mildly-interesting, and certainly well-intentioned book, that provides readers with some general historical background to major battles, but also proves that not every soldier's war-time journal makes for compelling reading.

The promise referred to is an agreement among four young friends, as they go off to war, that whoever survives the war will return to tell the families of those who died about how their loved ones perished. Somehow I suspect that such agreements were fairly standard fare among those faced with the strong possibility of not coming back from the horrors of war. Actually, I would think that most young men would contact the families of their dead friends without having made a promise to do so, but simply because it's the kind of thing a friend would do. But Coxen the writer, makes a big deal about his grandfather's promise, which is quite curious since Coxen, the soldier, thought so little of it that he never bothered to carry it out, despite the untimely deaths of his three friends. His grandson, for some vaguely romantic reasons, decided that he would try to fulfill his grandfather's promise by contacting surviving descendants of the three men who died, almost one hundred years after the fact. He presents long excerpts of his grandfather's memoir in order to set out the horrors of life in the trenches, but also as a starting point for his own journey to find the surviving relatives of the three soldiers who died in battle, and to learn more about his grandfather at the same time.

There are two problems in this endeavour: First of all, although Coxen, the young soldier, did see an enormous amount of death and destruction while serving with a battery unit, he wasn't writing with a reading audience in mind. As a result, most of the descriptions of his time in the war are told in a flat, unemotional

tone, with little to acknowledge the physical or psychological suffering that he or his comrades were undergoing. In fact, Coxen the soldier seems to go out of his way to make wartime seem monotonous, with many of his entries stating that on such and such a date they set up a battery at some small village, exchanged fire all day with German guns, while people he knew as well as total strangers died all around him, and the next day he went out and did it again. Even the violent deaths of the three friends with whom he made his promise are told in a brief, matter of fact way. In the end, the "self-portrait" of this soldier is very shallow, and two-dimensional, again something that Coxen, the soldier, scribbling away by candle light in the lulls between battles, probably would not have concerned himself with. This makes the journal perhaps valuable as an authentic historical record, but also makes it a pretty uninvolving read. The journal's entries do manage to give one a sense of the extreme wastefulness of this war, as tens of thousands of men on both sides were simply sent out into the fields to be ripped to shreds by enemy bullets and bombs, with little of strategic relevance ever being gained. But the journal's effect is little more than to tell us the war was horrible, while betraying very little of the writer's own sense of horror at what he was experiencing.

The second problem is that Coxen the writer's journey of discovery, while no doubt personally satisfying for him, is not exactly an exciting investigative tale. He spends the last fifteen pages or so of this book detailing how he spent hours on-line, going to ancestry.com, searching electronic historical archives, and posting questions on sites run by World War I aficionados, trying to get a line on the families of his grandfather's dead friends. The reader is not, sadly, treated to stories of racing across the globe to speak to an aging witness on his death bed, or poring through the half-burned records of some church for mention of these mysterious relatives. Instead Coxen tells us he spent many hours on his computer during his free time trying to track them down. Whatever drove him on his long on-line search, the detailed description of his efforts is about as uninteresting as one could imagine. Ironically, the one success he had in tracking down any descendants consisted in an exchange of e-mails with a man who was so distantly related to the dead soldier that he had no idea who he was. Great human drama this is not. Pretty much like the rest of this very OK book.

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### **Theresa Nash says**

#### **Almost a four – for history and research buffs**

#### **Mostly Non-Fiction, but...**

*The Great Promise* is an excellent chronicle of one man's experiences with the British Royal Field Artillery in WWI and his grandson's efforts to understand and carry out his grandfather's unfulfilled promise to his fellow soldiers. Only the lack of a bibliography and the short additions of fictional interludes keep this from being a four-star narrative.

In an old letter, Frederick Coxen learned of his grandfather's regret that he had not carried out the wishes of his war buddies. That is, to bring word of their experiences and demise home to the families they left behind. Inspired by the letter, Coxen combed through his grandfather's journal and began a search for surviving family members.

*The Great Promise* is predominantly composed of the author's grandfather's journal entries. The book is not a fictional story and doesn't try to be, though fictional bits are added to tie parts of the journal entries together. Chapters typically begin with historical summaries intended to put the journal entries in context, and the final chapters describe the author's efforts to locate surviving family.

**The Best:** The book is excellently transcribed and edited. The journal entries are dry at first, but contain excellent fodder for the enthusiast, or for someone seeking a realistic basis for a fiction story. The details of troop movements and munitions will undoubtedly provide the kind of detail historians and researchers appreciate.

I particularly enjoyed the scattered excerpts that shed more light on the man and his inner struggle. These moments of introspection and personal commentary on the events, brief as they were, were what engaged me.

I can't judge the accuracy of the summaries, I'll leave that to others, but the synopses, though dry for my tastes, were coherently summarized and did provide that important context.

In addition to the journal entries and synopses of strategic decisions, Coxen spends a significant portion of the text describing his efforts to complete his grandfather's unkept promise. The details of this admirable effort will doubtless provide insight for those on a similar quest.

**The Worst:** In the context of the whole, the fictional excerpts don't work; they muddy the clarity of the rest of the book. A bibliography is notably absent, so there is no foundation to determine the historical accuracy of the summaries. In short, this book doesn't know what it wants to be.

**Overall:** I enjoyed the book. In addition to the synopsis of battles and strategies, and in keeping with the Grandfather's journal entries, I would have enjoyed more insight into the conditions. For example, what kit did the typical soldier with his grandfather's responsibilities carry? Tell me more about those "line keepers". Were there many? How important were they to the overall war effort? Was scrounging for food commonplace? How did supplies get to the troops and what were the difficulties in doing so? How many were called up? How many made it home? What might his grandmother have been dealing with while her husband was off to war? If the author doesn't have family specifics, the use of typical information to speculate would have greatly enhanced the book without resorting to a fictional excerpt.

For me, as for the author, it was disappointing that he wasn't able to achieve a more concrete resolution, but I believe the efforts taken in compiling the book and in seeking out the descendants of his grandfather's friends have more than discharged whatever duty the author felt.

**Recommendation:** This is an excellent book if you're looking for a chronicle of the times, and I highly recommend it for history and battle buffs. The lack of a bibliography, however, makes it of limited research potential.

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