

The background of the cover is a complex, layered texture. It features a mix of dark brown, light brown, and black tones, suggesting a rough, possibly fibrous or paper-like material. There are some faint, circular patterns or markings scattered across the surface. A prominent white horizontal band runs across the lower third of the cover, serving as a backdrop for the title and author's name.

A NOVEL

# UNDERGROUND

JUNE HUTTON

# UNDERGROUND

JUNE HUTTON



*Cormorant Books*

Underground © June Hutton 2009  
This edition copyright © Cormorant Books Inc. 2009  
This is a first edition.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior written consent of the publisher or a licence from The Canadian Copyright Licensing Agency (Access Copyright). For an Access Copyright licence, visit [www.accesscopyright.ca](http://www.accesscopyright.ca) or call toll free 1.800.893.5777.



**Canada Council  
for the Arts**

**Conseil des Arts  
du Canada**



The publisher gratefully acknowledges the support of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council for its publishing program. We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Book Publishing Industry Development Program (BPIDP) for our publishing activities.

Printed and bound in Canada

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Hutton, June (Heather June Hutton)  
Underground/June Hutton.

ISBN 978-1-896951-81-2

1. World War, 1914-1918--Fiction. I. Title.

PS8615.U88 U54 2009 C813'.6 C2009-900669-3

Cover image and design: Angel Guerra/Archetype  
Text design: Tannice Goddard/Soul Oasis Networking  
Printer: Friesens

CORMORANT BOOKS INC.

215 SPADINA AVENUE, STUDIO 230, TORONTO, ON CANADA M5T 2C7  
[www.cormorantbooks.com](http://www.cormorantbooks.com)

*for my mother, Ivy Kathleen*

PREVIEW NOT FOR RESALE

*The story of war is told in the thousand and one things that  
mingle with the earth — equipment, bits of clothing almost  
unrecognizable, an old boot stuck up from a mound of filth, a  
remnant of sock inside ...*

— FRED VARLEY

OFFICIAL WAR ARTIST FOR CANADA

FIRST WORLD WAR

## The Somme, 1916

A MUD SKY CHURNS OVER a mud field broken by coils of barbed wire, a wheel severed from a cart, a tangle of brown limbs. He slides the barrel of the rifle over the dirt wall and nestles his cheek against cold metal and wood for one last sweep. No sign of movement. No spit in his mouth either. His own ragged breathing the only sound.

Relentless rain has collapsed the south wall and so they have spent the night digging. He, Kirk, Tubbs, another dozen of them up and down the trench, their helmets just skimming the top, a line of turtles along a ditch hoping their shells protect them. But approaching daylight is an oyster smear along the horizon. Attack is most likely now. They spear their shovels into their packs and fix bayonets to their rifles, take turns standing watch while the rest stamp their feet, blow on their fingertips to warm them and wait for the call to stand down.

He shoulders his rifle and jumps down from the fire step. Kirk takes his place. Tubbs shoves over to give him room, slaps him on the back.

He leans against the mud wall and drops the rifle upright. Holding the butt between his heels, he plucks a tin of bully beef from his pocket and jams it over the blade, twisting it around until the top gapes open. They were always waiting. For food, for orders, for

action. Usually they file blindly into the distance. Mostly they y duck. He pulls the tin free, pries the lid off and scoops a spoonful.

A stray bullet zips right through the tin and sprays the contents. Freckles on top of his freckles. He blinks for a moment and they all laugh. *You're seeing action now!* He wipes his cheek with his sleeve, laughs too. Probably one of their own bullets. From one of their own clumsy bastards. But they grip their rifles all the same.

Within minutes they are marching back toward their bunk in the support trenches. Another tour done, reinforcements on the way. Soon, they can leave the front, get out of their filthy uniforms. A bath and a hot meal. Shelves of books and a carpet on the floor. Almost like home. Nothing like their dugout — a hole scooped out of the side of a trench, where the only decoration is a photograph pinned to the dirt wall. The four of them in the photographer's studio, Artie, sharp-featured and thin, Kirk, hairy-faced like a Scottie dog, Tubbs, plump-cheeked, all of them grinning into the camera except for him, helmet tucked under his arm, dark eyes caught off guard, looking down and off to the side. *Take it down, Tubbs*, he's begged. But Tubbs won't. He says, *One of us has to look like he gives a damn.* And in the end it's all they have of Artie. So it has stayed.

His boots squelch through brown water and mud. A square of brown sky above, the brown shoulders of the soldier in front of him, walls of brown dirt all around. Back home doesn't seem real any more — blue sky, green ocean. Trees.

There are no trees at the front, nothing to mark one trench from another. Yet they know exactly when to turn left, then right. Tubbs calls it their homing instinct. They turn left one last time and he knows without looking that they have reached their dugout. The mud is so thick it glues one boot to the ground. He has to grab his shin with two hands and pull and then quickly roll onto his bunk before getting stuck again.

He doesn't hear a sound, not a thing. His hands are still clutching his boot when the cold air becomes an oven, hot breath roars into his ears. A heavy hand clamps onto his skull and flings him up into folds of hot air, each layer hotter than the last. Upside down in that mud sky his guts jam against his lungs, his lungs crush into his throat, while the row of turtle shells below him bursts apart like a broken string of beads. The brown sky balloons and then collapses, hurtles him back to the ground. He falls through the air, past rocks and boots and shells that spin like tops, into the same brown dirt that has lifted him and now, instantly, buries him.

THE AFTERDAMP

PREVIEW NOT FOR RESALE

## One

IN THE SOUP GREEN CORRIDOR of an English hospital he sits on a wooden bench, his hands in his lap. To his left, another bench. Several others in bleached bedclothes wait their turns to be examined, bandaged, interviewed. To his right, the same. They haven't seen each other before this day, but each of them has been blown up somewhere. Belgium. France.

Already a doctor has told him, *We'll have you back in no time*. But he doesn't want to go back. He doesn't give a damn if the other side gains more ground — they can have it all. Every festering inch.

The others stare ahead like dead men. It's rotten luck, this whole mess. His throat burns but he leans forward, tries to catch an eye as he rasps, "Rot' luck," and waits for a response.

The radiators steam. A forgotten cart of dirty bandages steams beside him. Nothing.

He throws himself back against the hard bench and folds his arms.

"Albert Fraser?" The ruddy-faced matron rolls her *Rs* slightly as she whisks along the row repeating his name, her veil of white cotton flung from crown to shoulders, green eyes scanning the faces. Surely she can pick him out from this lot. But no, she doesn't remember him. She only stops when she nears the foul cart, nostrils flaring as she bellows, "Someone wheel this off!"

He gets to his feet, even though it pains him. She looks him up, down, then checks the chart. "Albert Fraser?"

He nods.

"Well, speak up."

He points to his throat, strains to say, "Sorry."

"Oh, yes. You. The doctor will see you tomorrow. Ten o'clock."

ALBERT REELS ALONG THE HALLWAY to his ward, past sacks of soiled bedding, carts of crusted dishes and a janitor with a string mop that cuts a wet figure eight on the floor and spreads the smell of piss from wall to wall. As he steps over the damp loops, Albert clamps his mouth shut and tries not to breathe in the stink.

Tomorrow. He knows what that could mean. He's seen for himself through a door left ajar. Just a flash of movement, but enough. Limbs jerking above a tangle of black wires. Strings of drool from a gaping mouth, the sound coming from it monstrous, a howl like a dog's, but deeper, more anguished, struggling to become a voice but failing miserably. The door had slammed shut, leaving Albert with the animal sound in his ears. And something else. A whiff of scorched hair in his nose and on his tongue. It fouled everything he tasted for the rest of that day. Yesterday.

He lifts his eyes to the walls. A former British boys' school set aside for the Canadians. The boys are gone, of course. They've gone to war, too. But their photographs are still up. Did no one think of that? Glowing, healthy boys with solid limbs and minds, looking down on the broken boy-men who've come back. Did no one think they might look up, see versions of what they had once been, what they had lost?

He runs a hand across his face, but still he feels the emotion that ripples under his skin like a live thing. He waits until his features smooth, then presses forward, a hand on the wall when his legs threaten to collapse.

But the unaccustomed movement of walking sends shock waves through his guts. He staggers to the lavatory, waving back the nurse who calls, "Do you need assistance?"

Christ, no. He's already suffered the indignity of the bedpan and the night shift's exclamations about the weight.

*It's full of sand, one of them said. The same thing happened to my sister's boy when he was teething. He ate the sand and it went straight through him into his nappies.*

Nappies! In the stark lavatory Albert's forehead beads in sweat as the sand rakes through him. He was all bound up after the explosion, the result of three days of no food or water. In the field hospital he lay under a white tent listening to the distant whump of guns. Bluebirds, that's what they called the nurses, fluttered in to feed him sips of water and broth. Every day the withered hands of a practised nurse pushed back her blue sleeves and kneaded the fles of his belly, trying to coax his bowels back to life. They were stubbornly still until he reached England.

The sand began its slow grind yesterday, and now there seems to be no stopping it. When he pisses it stings like grains of glass, and when he coughs it comes up black grit into his handkerchief. Having scraped his throat going down, it scrapes again coming back up. It hurts to swallow.

As the cramps snake through him, he puts his elbows on his knees, buries his face in his hands, lets the darkness pull him back again to the shells thudding into the dirt, him falling to ward the ground that rose to bury him, telling himself, *I'm going to die*, then everything going black.

He lifts his face into the harsh light glancing off white hospital tile. But that's just it: he didn't.

At the sink, he glares at his reflection in the warped mirror, distorted, inhuman. Nerves prickle down his back and he turns away from the sight.

When he reaches the doorway to his ward, he scans the two long rows of beds that flank the walls. The same bunch, no one new. There are four besides him who can sit up and move about. They're playing cards intently and don't notice him hobble in. As always, he veers near the faceless mummy with shrivelled air holes over mouth and nose, two vacant slots for eyes. How do the nurses even know there's anything alive in there? It can't speak, and how it eats he can't fathom. The sight of a nurse spooning sludge into it had Albert limping out the door fast as he was able.

Now, the dinner hour far off, he stands at the bedside and stares into the eye holes. He can feel sound travelling up his windpipe, teasing his tongue.

When he opens his mouth to speak, though, the only word he can manage is a clipped, "Al!" But soon, soon. And he likes the abbreviated name. Clean and crisp, easy to say. It makes a statement: here I am. To complete his introduction, he takes up the hand to shake it.

Fingertips flutter against his palm—the creep of lice along the scalp, the scuttle of rats over limbs. A death twitch. He drops the hand, horrified and backs up, rubbing his palm against his thigh, seeking the roughness of fabric, the heat of friction. He wishes he could find a sheet of sandpaper, a fistful of jagged rocks, and scour the sensation from his skin.

He staggers to the window beside his bed, pulled by the sight of green hedges and lawn. Along a walkway, trees toss in the wind. He presses his palm against the cool glass, imagining ragged bark.

Behind him, the others continue playing cards.

His legs throb. He needs to rest. He sits on his bed, swings both legs up and over. Sweat greases his face. His legs, heavy as tree trunks.

He leans on one elbow and hikes up the cotton leggings, their coloured stripes bleached until they matched his pasty skin. The field doctor said the swelling in his legs was nothing serious. *Got a*

*bit banged up, I imagine.* The nurses told him to walk as much as possible and elevate the legs when sitting or lying.

Al presses his thumb against the fat flesh and counts to ten before the thumbprint vanishes. No searing pain or pounding of blood, just a dull ache. The skin is stretched tight as a bandage. It feels as if it could burst open at any moment.

He wrestles open the drawer of the bedside table and fumbles inside for the book he borrowed from the second floor's collection. He rolls onto his right side so that he won't have to look at the mummy, and opens the book. A map just like a treasure map, but titled *Hardy's Wessex*. He flips through the pages, his attention snagged by the single word "naked." Back to the top of the page he begins reading the scene, but quickly discovers it's not that sort of book. It's about a woman named Tess who is captivated by the sounds of a harp as she walks in a wild garden. He reads and rereads the paragraph about her undulating among the weeds, branches and blades of grass tugging at her skirts and blouse, her naked arms stained by pollen and slug slime.

He snaps the book closed and a letter slides out — the last from his brother, one he had hastily stuffed into the book. He unfolds the sheets and studies the words, again:

*Dear Bertie,*

*How are you and did you get the tin of sweets we sent?*

*We are all in good health, not a sniffle amongst us this fall. Mum would have had a good crop of tomatoes but for the damage done by the rain. They were quite black with blight and we had to throw the works out. Did you know that the old bastard has an eye on some ranch land in the interior? He says there'll be no blight there it's so dry, and poor Mum, she believes him. Not about the blight, of course, but that they'll last long enough on the place to see a tomato grow. You and I know better.*

The rest is about the union and the mine . Albert asked Jack to send him a world map that he could fold up into his poc ket, so he could see where he was. But Jack wrote at the bottom of this letter, *P.S. You're in France!* Very funny. And anyway, he isn't, now. He's back in England, green England.

But Jack doesn't know that yet. None of them do.

He stuffs the letter back into the book and drops his arm. Damn the old man — he knows nothing about ranching. He knew nothing about r unning a far m in Manitoba, either, or a hotel in London before that, but that didn't stop him.

Albert star es at the ceiling . A ranch. Sagebr ush and clouds of dust. Home is supposed to be blue mountains and green ocean.

A s weet v oice calls do wn the w ard, "Gentlemen, hello," and Albert wriggles up into a sitting position. A young nurse, all smiles and scrubbed, pink skin, has flo ted into the ward.

He opens his lips to accept the ther mometer, holds up his ar m to have his pulse tak en and watches the blue sleeves of the pr etty nurse move across the clipboard as she records the readings.

"Mar-ry," he sa ys when she pluc ks the ther mometer fr om his lips, his voice rough but clear.

"Well, listen to you," she says, smiling up fr om the chart. "Your throat is getting much better, Albert."

"Al," he says. Albert is a name she might g ive her brother.

"Al, is it, now?" She has a lilt to her v oice. Eyes as blue as her dress. He noted that his fi st day here. His wrist throbs where she placed her finger and thumb . He pictur es her hand in his, golden fields shimme ing as they walk the evening hills toward home. He is seeing Manitoba and the soddie tha t had been his famil y's fi st house in Canada, not that coal-miner's shack in Nanaimo that was home before he ran off to enlist.

His eyes follow Mary as she leaves his bedside, stopping to check each of the men.

He was just fourteen years of age when he went into the ground. The other miners said he should go work with the Chinese, he was so short. And he had those narrow eyes. They got him drunk once, and tried to shove him into one of the Chinese tunnels, so cramped those workers had to crawl on their bellies. He saw their faces in the dark tunnel ahead. Monkey people, that's what the other miners called them. Thick-lipped and narrow-eyed. Monkey chatter that lifted the hair on his scalp. He fought back fiercely, arms swinging at his drinking partners as he burst out of the tunnel. They said, *What a soldier he'd make.* He threw up right at the pithead, right at their feet.

That was almost three years ago. He's grown half a foot since then.

He still has narrow eyes, though. Narrower.

Mary picks up the mummy's wrist and scratches something onto the chart. Then gently, she places the arm by its side. She waves to all of them before stepping into the corridor. Al watches until her blue dress rounds a corner, then he eases back against his pillow.

His thoughts swell and recede. His friend Joe, arms raised as he gestured at the raw dirt walls of Nanaimo's Newcastle Seam, blue eyes bugging out of a coal-blackened face, lips a surprising pink as they described the dangers. Explosions, drownings, cave-ins. All the things that can kill a man. *Mostly it's the fumes,* he told him.

*There's an explosion far off and maybe even a cave-in, but there's not a mark on you. Then the fumes arrive. What they call the afterdamp. It forms after the explosions, but it kills you all the same.*

Albert survived two years chopping coal in the tunnels, though it felt like half his life. Joe gave him a lump of coal for good luck, and when he packed for overseas he tucked it between the rows of socks. *Bertie!* His mother cried. *What's this?* When he told her what it was for, she clapped a hand over her mouth and turned away.

Overnight, his legs continue to expand, until by morning the skin shines, and lumps form within the bloated flesh. There is no ten o'clock appointment for him. A relief, though he's alarmed at the sight of his legs, fat and mottled, a bluish grey that looks almost like bruises. His veins must be filling with dirt.

The nurses giggle when he tells them. Even Mary. He lets go of her hand and never again walks through glimmering fields with her.

He wants to pound the walls, tear his hair out, dig his nails into his skin to relieve the pressure. As he writhes on the bed, his mind fills with images of the land around Nanaimo's harbour, ink-veined like his legs, pockmarked by black holes, seething with the entrails of constantly moving coal.

Only the surgeon understands what's wrong. Later, he shows Al the hunks of metal that rattle around in a tray. There'll be no more marching for him, he says. He's removed enough shrapnel from Al's legs to get him a boat ride home.

Home. It's a word that has a shape, full and round, and he holds it close, even though he knows it has changed as surely as he has.