

For an image sampler and related resources, please see: [Helen Johns Kirtland - Introduction](#)

Helen Johns Kirtland (1890-1979)

Helen Johns Kirtland was an early woman war photojournalist active at the end of World War I. She was the “the first and only woman correspondent allowed at the front after Caporetto, the 1917 Italian retreat in which 275,000 troops were captured.”¹ As a photojournalist, she worked for *Leslie’s Illustrated Weekly* in Europe and was also associated with the YMCA. Like many of her male colleagues, she covered a variety of subjects that required facing danger and capturing images that could be readily published to convey the war visually.



LC-USZ62-115862

In 1981, the Library of Congress received a gift from Mark and Birk Hinderaker of some four thousand photos taken by Helen and her husband Lucian Swift Kirtland. The Kirtland Collection at the Library of Congress include about two hundred images of World War I and its aftermath. The earliest images are family portraits, and the bulk of the collection represents their post war travels in Europe and Asia. Although relatively little documentation has been found to date, Helen’s life and career merit further study.

Early life

Helen Johns Kirtland was born on March 28, 1890, to Henry W. Johns, owner of the Johns-Manville Corporation which developed industrial uses for asbestos, and his wife Emily Warner. Helen grew up in Park Hill, Yonkers, but after her father died in 1898, her mother moved the family to Lawrence Park, a turn-of-the-century arts colony in Bronxville, New York. As a young woman, Helen spent time in Europe, and in 1904 she attended a German school for girls. In 1909 she toured Spain with her mother, sister Mabel, and other female family members. She exchanged postcards with her mother, sister, and grandmother from places such as Germany, Switzerland, and France. Their notes indicate that their touring party actively collected distinctive photographic postcards as they traveled, and also made their own photographs. A Dec. 5, 1903, postcard from her mother, then in Dresden, Germany, to Helen in Berlin, reads “We are just about starting out to see the town and try some photos.”²

War photography

On November 11, 1917, Helen married Lucian Swift Kirtland in a small family wedding in Bronxville. The couple immediately went to France for Lucian’s job.³ Originally from Poland, Ohio, Lucian was a

¹ *Leslie’s Photographic Review of the Great War*. (New York: Leslie-Judge, 1919) 107.

² Kirtland Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, container 12, folder 4.

³ “Engagements,” *New York Times*. Nov. 4, 1917, <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=113303764&sid=5&Fmt=1&clientId=45714&RQT=309&VName=HNP>

1903 Yale graduate, nine years Helen's senior. From 1904 to 1910, he worked as a newspaper reporter in Minneapolis. Over the next few years he joined several expeditions that took him to British Columbia, Siberia, and Japan.⁴ In 1912, Pictorialist photographer Gertrude Käsebier made his portrait. In 1916, he was a correspondent with the Russian army and, in 1917 and 1918, he reported from the Western Front of World War I for *Leslie's Illustrated Weekly*.

During World War I, Helen worked in Europe under the auspices of the YMCA, and as a guest of the United States Navy and Army. She also worked as a correspondent for *Leslie's Illustrated Weekly*, based in France. Her familiarity with western Europe, ability to communicate in several languages, and instinct to view scenes photographically were assets to her photojournalism assignments.

Initially the Kirtlands were stationed in France where colleagues made playful photographs of them. Photographs made closer to the front show Helen in the trenches, with a helmet and gas mask for protection. *Leslie's Photographic Review of the Great War*, published in 1919, includes several pages of Helen's war photographs. The titles reflect the wide range of her photographic assignments. They include: "A Woman on the Battle Front," "Verdun - 'They Shall Not Pass!'," "Winning the War from the Clouds," Czechoslovakia in "A New Nation Born of War," American camouflage work in "Secrets of the Camouflage Artists," the Paris peace conference in "The Great Day at Versailles, when France Effaced the Memory of 1871," and "The Greatest Moment in History."

Helen, like most female photographers, showed particular concern to document women's activities respectfully. In its November 30, 1918, issue, *Leslie's Magazine* published Kirtland's picture story, "A Tribute to Women War Workers," about a gathering to honor the many groups of women who for the four years of the war had aided the Allied armies and lessened the sufferings of civilians. It included a portrait of Madame Poincare, wife of the President of France, hostess of the afternoon event. A caption that mentions an advantage sometimes extended woman-to-woman reads, "Seldom indeed has Mme. Poincare allowed her photograph to be taken, and Mrs. Kirtland was allowed the privilege at the reception by special invitation."⁵

Observations at the end of the war

The Library's collection of the Kirtland's photographs and papers includes a powerful letter that Helen wrote to her mother just after the end of the war. In it, she describes some of the destruction in the countryside. "I did not even take a general view of the Mennin Road territory photographically for there was nothing nothing absolutely to be found in the finder - I might as well have gone out into our middle/west prairies and focused on the horizon! - and it certainly proves something when [Lucian] and I don't snap away at a picture or two!"⁶

Helen's vivid account of land mines offers a flavor of her writing style. On a post-war tour sponsored by the Belgian Relief Committee, she wrote a letter to her mother on the back of a postcard series that presages future concerns for the long term impact of war. It is transcribed here exactly as she wrote.

I am first begining to get over the queer sensation of crossing the lines & wandering in no man's land, even yet one hears tremendous explosions now & then—& these only add local color—
Appropriate sounds to describe the sights! For they are of course cleaning up the country of duds

⁴ *Who Was Who in America*, IV (Kirtland, Lucian Swift) s.v.

⁵ Helen Johns Kirtland, "A Tribute to Women War Workers," *Leslie's Weekly* 125 (November 30, 1917): 682.

⁶ Kirtland Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, container 12, folder 6.

as systematically as they can—My! what a job!! I'd hate to be a farmer in these parts! ...Every now & again someone gets "Bumped off" The shells & their little brothers the hand grenades, are not a race of savages to get too chummy with & stub your toe on one as you tramp thru the pits & hummocks among the lines—may mean—you wont finish the days program. I am quite well trained—in fact I guesse most of us who have been here during the war when the air was alive with them, are—. & no souvenir hunting is worth risking the consequences of touching these steel fiends that may not be dead but only sleeping!

The beaches too will have to undergo a spring cleaning to be ready for children & their sand pails & shovels for they are chuck-full of barbed wire—& mines lie in half dozens unexploded & menacing; some nearly buried in drifts trying to sink into oblivion—to forget their era & wicked life—others standing quite on tiptoe & ready to fight—& when the wind blew sand around their "horns" I imagined I could see smoke, warning us that given occasion, or un-careful treatment, this round fat dragon would belch forth more than smoke—fire sharp steel, & distruction One doesn't turn these things over on their backs to see the other side!⁷

Later life

There is no evidence that Helen wanted to pursue a career of her own after the war ended, but her penciled notation "By H. K." beside an uncredited photograph in "The Nation Created by War" in her personal copy of *Leslie's Photographic Review of the Great War* shows that she did care about claiming her own work.

In the 1920s, the Kirtlands worked as a team, traveling extensively throughout Europe and Asia. Their collection of photographs included images from California, Hawaii, the Bahamas, the Philippines, France, England, India, Afghanistan, Pakistan, China, Japan, Portugal, Turkey, Burma, Indonesia, Russia, and eastern and central European countries. Lucian wrote for publications such as *Harper's Monthly*, *Red Book*, *Asia*, *Travel*, *American Legion Weekly*, and the *New York Herald Tribune* magazine. Helen often made the photographs that accompanied her husband's articles but was rarely credited. Lucian published two books about his travels, *Samurai Trails* (1918) and *Finding the Worth While in the Orient* (1926). Both books are dedicated to Helen and include uncredited photographs, which are possibly hers.

Throughout their extensive world travels, the Kirtlands maintained a home at 51 Summit Avenue in the planned community of Bronxville, home to many writers and playwrights. Lucian died there on October 10, 1965⁸ and Helen died fourteen years later on October 3, 1979.⁹

⁷ Kirtland Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, container 12, folder 6.

⁸ "Lucian S. Kirtland, Ex-War Reporter and Editor, Is Dead," *New York Times*. Oct. 12, 1965, <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=95911416&sid=1&Fmt=1&clientId=45714&RQT=309&VName=HNP>

⁹ "Helen Johns Kirtland Dies at 89; Was Widow of Explorer-Author," *New York Times*. Oct. 3, 1979, <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=112122905&sid=4&Fmt=1&clientId=45714&RQT=309&VName=HNP>