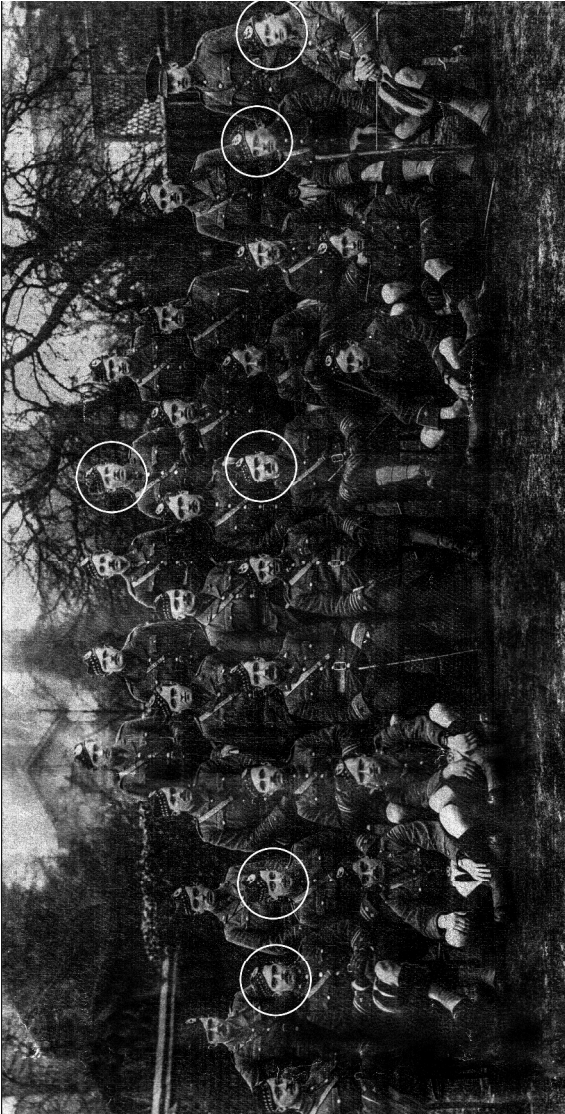


No 20. 4th Battalion Gordon Highlanders, 1915, Bedford Barracks



E W H Brander

Charles Reid

W L Cook

G A Smith

J B Gillies

A M Wilson

No 21. The Buzancy Pillar



“ICI FLEURIRA TOUJOURS LE GLORIEUX CHARDON D'ECOSSE
PARMIS LES ROSES DE FRANCE.”
(Buzancy, 28th July, 1918.)

THE CAIRNGORM CLUB AND THE FIRST WORLD WAR

MARK PEEL

After the battle of Buzancy in May 1918, a French General, impressed by the performance and sacrifice of the Gordon Highlanders (GH), had a stone memorial erected (see colour photograph No 21), and inscribed with the words:

“Ici fleurira toujours le glorieux Chardon d’Ecosse parmi les Roses de France.”

“Here will flourish forever the glorious thistle of Scotland amongst the roses of France.”

This article is a contribution to the Club’s commemoration of its members’ service in the First World War. The Club published an account of this war service in 1919, (*Cairngorm Club Journal*, 49, 1919, pp. 244-254). I have sought to add to this material through research at the Gordon Highlanders Museum, reading Club Minutes held in the University of Aberdeen Special Collection and scouring other Journal and In Memoriam articles elsewhere. My reading has been further supplemented by the books “The History of the Gordon Highlanders in the First World War” and “The Grammar at War 1914-1918”, by Richard Lewis Campbell Dargie, 2014. In addition, my search has taken me to the war memorial of King’s College Chapel.

Haldane’s reforms of 1907 led in 1908 to the old Volunteer Regiments being replaced by the Territorial Force (TF). At the outbreak of the war this entire force was asked to volunteer for overseas service, which they did. Many Cairngorm Club members served in the Gordon Highlanders Territorial Force. Some were soon mobilised and spent some months training in Bedford (see colour photograph No 20). The emphasis in training was on physical fitness rather than the use of machine guns.

In 1914 the Club had a membership of 140, and 41 members ultimately served in the war, a proud record for the Club. Nine members were to lose their lives, and in this account, I have kept their deaths in chronological order, followed by those who survived active

service in alphabetical order. The information on some men is of necessity scant and for others more detailed. The number of words devoted to each man should not of course be taken as a measure of their war effort.

Club Minutes note that the Club donated three guineas to a dressing depot where women volunteered to make up bandages. Lady Aberdeen was President of the Red Cross at the time and toured the country to help set up these depots. It is estimated that during the war the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC) used 108 million bandages.

As graduates of Aberdeen University, George Buchanan Smith, George Alexander Smith, Robert Lyon and James Brown Gillies are commemorated in the Kings College Chapel, Book of Remembrance. All Club members are mentioned on the Edinburgh Castle War Memorial and variously on local memorials throughout Aberdeen city and shire.

Coile – Mhrochan

*At dusk I flung my knapsack on the heath,
I made my bracken bed, I supped, and soon
As daylight faded from the glen beneath,
Cool winds among the firs were rising fast,
Stirring the sleeping branches till they cast
Black limbs athwart the silver moon.*

This is the first verse of a poem written by **George Buchanan Smith**, the Club's first fatality and printed in the *Cairngorm Club Journal*, (49, 1917, p. 35). He was the brother of Janet Adam Smith, a distinguished author and mountaineer (see Book Review section). It was only after his death that his family became aware that he had been writing poetry about his 'tramps' through Scotland. He was an ardent mountaineer and in his short life had done many long and hard walks over the greater part of Scotland. An account of his seven days walk from Glasgow to Braemar was printed in the *Cairngorm Club Journal*, (49, pp. 20-26). For part of this trip he was accompanied by old

Glasgow Academy schoolmate, James Wordie, who would later accompany Shackleton to Antarctica as a geologist. George had also visited the English Lake District and the Pyrenees.

Whilst studying for the Scottish Bar he was gazetted a Second Lieutenant in August 1914 and was in Flanders by December. On the 14th, while leading his platoon in a charge on the German trenches he was severely wounded. George however was back in France by August 1915 and was killed in action in September while leading his platoon of the 12th Battalion of the Gordons in the first charge of the advance on Loos, a coal-mining area, and a far cry from his beloved Cairngorms. A battalion from every Scottish regiment fought in this battle. Virtually all communities in Scotland were affected by the high level of casualties.

Robert Lyon, like George Buchanan Smith, was studying for the Scottish Bar and was 24 years when he died. He had been a Club member since 1907, full of enthusiasm for mountaineering. As his climbing experiences extended, he developed a deep passion for the hills. Robert had been a sergeant in the University Company of the Territorial Force (TF), and speedily received a commission on the outbreak of war, eventually achieving the rank of Captain. Though wounded whilst advancing with his company of 4th Gordon Highlanders, in the face of withering fire, during one of the battles of the Somme, he continued to lead his men on, but was killed in front of the German wire entanglements on 30 July 1916.

Ian McLaren's association with the Club began in 1906. He was a keen naturalist and led many excursions to the hills around Aberdeen before leaving for California in 1911. He is remembered by the Club for climbing the six Cairngorms in one day in June 1908. Ian had also climbed in Zermatt and skied in the Bernese Oberland. His friend recalled a weekend in Ballater when they drove up Glen Muick, strapped on their skis at Alltnaguibhsach and ascended Lochnagar in glorious Winter sunshine. On returning to Britain in 1915 he joined the London Scottish as a Private. He died on 7 October 1916 while

charging with his regiment on the Somme. He is remembered, with Robert Lyon, on the Thiepval Memorial.

James B. Gillies was Secretary and Treasurer of the Club from 1912 to 1916 and was also for a while Editor of the Journal. He took part in many of the Club's activities including the building of the Bennie Bridge, and would often ride out to Inverey on his motorbike. A former pupil of Aberdeen Grammar School, he was a founder member of the Former Pupil's Motorcycle Club. He was re-commissioned in 1914 and went with the 4th GH to France in March 1916. James was heavily involved on the Somme battlefield, and the advance on Beaumont Hamel. He was killed in action on 13 November, while clearing a German trench, shortly before its capture. James wrote an article for the *Cairngorm Club Journal*, (47, 1916, pp. 181-184), in which he describes travelling back up to the Front through the communication trenches. He bemoans the lack of features because of shelling. He does, however, allow himself to dream of a week at Maggie Gruer's, with an increased appreciation of the hills. "*However, a day will come when one will return to the hills and return with an increased appreciation of their splendour and of one's luck in getting to them.*" Sadly, this was not to be.

William Meff was the fourth member of the Club to die in 1916, and the second to die following the battle for Beaumont Hamel. He was one of the 'Ultramontane' members of the Club, being exceptionally keen on snow climbing. It is recorded that he had cut snow and ice steps up most of the corries and gullies of the Cairngorms. He was commissioned in February 1915 and went to France three months later. William acted for some months as Brigade Bombing Officer which involved the use of hand and rifle grenades. He was there at all the major engagements of the Somme Offensive. He died on the 14th November, of shrapnel wounds received the day before, in the Battle of Beaumont Hamel. The GH probably never fought in less favourable conditions.

Robert Dunn became a member of the Club in 1911 and was one of the group who frequently made weekend motorcycle runs to Inverey

and from there explored the hills. He had climbed on Lochnagar, and had completed a long walk in Ross-shire before joining up. As a former Territorial, he was commissioned and was sent out to France in Autumn 1915. He saw much heavy fighting with his unit of the GH and was fortunate to emerge from the attack on Beaumont Hamel unscathed. On 23 April 1917 he was wounded almost immediately he got over the parapet. Stopping only to have his wound bound, he went on with his men and was killed by a machine gun bullet in front of the German wire. He was one of the few Club members to leave a widow and child.

James Ellis was 20 years old when he joined the Club in 1912 and was a keen mountaineer. Rowing was another of his interests and for some years he was in the Aberdeen Boat Club's championship crew. Like James Gillies and Robert Dunn, he was an enthusiastic motorcyclist. He joined the GH in September 1914 and went to France in April 1915. By June he was back in England suffering from trench fever. Up to a third of the British soldiers examined by a doctor suffered from this disease. It was only after the war that the cause was discovered to be a bacterium carried by body lice. The kilt worn by many Scottish soldiers had severe disadvantages in the conditions met in the trenches of the Western Front, with lice harbouring in the folds. James rejoined his battalion in March 1917 and was wounded on 22 April while fighting on the Scarpe. He died two days later in a casualty clearing station.

Austin J. C. Fyfe was 39 years old and the last of three members to die in 1917. He became a member of the Club in 1911 and was both an enthusiastic mountaineer and skier. Many of his friends remembered his musical ability; for several years he acted as music critic for the Aberdeen Daily Journal. He worked as an actuary for Northern Assurance and had written a notable paper on insurance statistics affecting women. He volunteered in 1915 and received a commission in the Aberdeen Territorial Artillery. He went out to France in 1916 and was detailed for trench mortar work. Austin was killed in action on 23 November 1917. The trench mortar was a new development for the

First World War and it was only in 1915 that a successful design became available. By 1916 there were highly organised units within each brigade. The 3-inch Stokes mortar could fire up to nine rounds a minute and be used to suppress an enemy machine gun post or a sniper position.

George Alexander Smith was the last of Club members to die, in July 1918. He joined the Club in 1911 and regularly attended the outings. George had been an enthusiastic member of both the Volunteer Force and the TF, and when war broke out held the rank of major in the 4th Battalion of the GH. George was with his battalion in France from February to December 1915 and took part in many engagements. He was wounded, and the pocket book that stopped a penetrating shrapnel bullet is in the Gordon Highlanders Museum. He was in command of the 8th King's Own Regiment before spending a year at General Headquarters. Though more than once offered a staff appointment, he preferred to serve as an active combatant. From October 1917 he was either second in command or in command of a battalion of the GH. During the war he was wounded twice, was awarded the Distinguished Service Order, and was twice mentioned in dispatches. At the battle for Buzancy he was Officer Commanding the 5th Battalion. He took up an exceedingly exposed position on top of a hill to observe the progress of his men and was killed by a shell splinter on 28 July 1918.

In addition to the deaths of the 9 members described thus far, the Club had another 32 who variously served through the theatre of war.

William Barclay joined up in November 1916, serving as a gunner, following his return from South Africa. He was a qualified dentist and the army was short of these skills. Yet it was another 6 months before the army posted him to Oswestry in charge of the garrison's dental centre.

Eric Brander was mobilised with the 4th Battalion GH in August 1914. He went out to France in February 1915 and served with the 51st Highland Division. In May 1916 he was put in charge of the Infantry Training School at Calais, and after a year was transferred to

Headquarters staff. In 1921 he was awarded the Chevalier Order de Leopold (Belgium).

Henry Butchart served throughout the war and travelled further afield than many of our members. He was mobilised in August 1914 and was officer commanding the depot of the Scottish Horse until 1915. He accompanied his regiment to Egypt in May 1916 and held a series of administrative roles. He was present at most of the critical battles against the Turkish forces, including the taking of Jerusalem. Henry was later transferred to France with 4th GH and was part of the advance that broke through the Hindenburg Line. He received the Distinguished Service Order (DSO) and the Star of Roumania.

In later life, he was a founder member of the *Scottish Ski Club* and became President in 1950. There is a Butchart Corrie on Glas Maol named after him. Butchart also played a major role in planning and developing the University of Aberdeen's sports facilities and the physical activity centre, which bears his name. He received an OBE in 1951. In 1970 he was made an Honorary Member for services to the Club but sadly died soon afterwards.

William Cook joined the 4th Battalion GH in September 1914 and was wounded near Ypres in June 1915. In November of that year, he was attached to the Admiralty Transport Department and by May 1916 he was working for the Principal Naval Officer based in Archangel. His father was a ship owner, and this new role probably more accurately matched his previous experiences. He had to facilitate the supply of large quantities of Russian timber for the armies in France. He was decorated with the Order of St. Anne by the Tsar. After the revolution, unable to return to Archangel, William was based in Bergen. Here he was engaged in running convoys between the Scandinavian countries and the Allies.

Eldred Corner was mobilised in August 1914 and served as an Officer in the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC). He worked at the London General Hospital, the King George Hospital and Queen Mary's Auxiliary Hospital for the limbless at Roehampton.

William Croll was mobilised as a member of the RAMC Home Hospital Reserve to serve at Aberdeen Military Hospital with the rank of Captain. He was appointed officer in charge of the hospital early in 1915 and continued in that post until demobilised in January 1919. Five military hospitals were established in Aberdeen by the end of the war.

James Crombie was a Captain in the RAMC (TF) and attached to the 1st Scottish General Hospital, Aberdeen. He served here throughout the war, becoming the officer in command of the centre for the treatment of jaw injuries and the Aberdeen Military Dental Centre.

John Dickson was in France in May 1915 with the 6th GH and was wounded in June, being invalided home. Once he had recovered from his wounds he was promoted Major and involved in the command of training units in Britain

James Duffus also saw action at Beaumont Hamel. He served with the 51st Highland Division in the Royal Field Artillery, going out to France in May 1915. James took part in all his brigade's engagements. During the war he was awarded the Military Cross and Croix de Guerre.

James Edwards practised law in Aberdeen. A member of the TF, he was mobilised in August 1914. Proceeding to France in May 1915, he was in the Royal Field Artillery which formed part of the 1st Highland Brigade. James served throughout the war and was present in all his unit's engagements.

Alexander Galloway was a major in the RAMC (TF) and was attached to the 1st Scottish General Hospital. Alexander acted as an ophthalmic specialist to the Medical Recruiting Board and Ministry of Pensions in Aberdeen.

Alexander M. Johnston was mobilised in July 1914. He had already overseen the Signal Section of the 4th GH. He went to France in May 1915 and was wounded on 3rd June. Sent back to England, he did not return until November 1916. He was responsible for the lines of communication behind the fighting and served in this capacity until the

end of the war, and was present in all the engagements in which his unit took part.

David Levack, the youngest member to volunteer, joined the Wireless Division of the Signals aged 17 in February 1917. He finished the war as a Sergeant Instructor at Haynes Park. After the war he trained as a doctor and maintained his membership of the Club, being President 1935 to 1937. David was mobilised at the outbreak of World War Two and was captured at St. Valery, spending four years as a prisoner of war. Now a colonel, he was awarded a CBE by King George VI for gallant and distinguished service in the field.

John Levack was also a member of the RAMC (TF). He was mobilised on war being declared and was attached to the 1st Scottish as Medical Officer in charge of the x-ray and electrical departments. Promoted Major in 1915, he held these posts until November 1919. He was President of the Club from 1919 to 1924 and was still serving on the committee in 1931.

James Lorimer saw his first action in May 1915 and then served on the Western Front in the Army Service Corps for the duration of the war. He was wounded at Ypres in 1916 and later awarded the OBE (Military).

James C. D. Mackie saw four years of active service on the Western Front. He was promoted Captain in June 1916 and wounded in March 1918. He was gassed in the war and died of pneumonia in 1919.

James B. Miller was in the Royal Engineers (TF) and took his company to France in April 1915, remaining in command of it throughout the war. He was involved in building defensive positions and sites required by artillery units. During the progress of the war James had to both demolish bridges and finally build ones that could take heavy transport. For these achievements, often under fire, he was awarded the Military Cross.

Arthur Milne retired from the Volunteer Force in 1900 but rejoined in August 1915. He was then involved in the construction of a School of Aerial Gunnery at Loch Doon, Ayrshire, and subsequently acted as Camp Commandant.

John Murray was employed on coastal defence for three years before joining a Siege Battery of the Royal Garrison Artillery. He was on the Ypres Salient until the Armistice.

Alexander McConnochie served in the Army Service Corps in Glasgow until 1918. What is little mentioned is that he was a qualified accountant aged 68 years when the war ended. Alexander was a founder member of the Club, the first Club Secretary, the first Meets Secretary and the first Editor of the Journal. It has been said that in the years after the Club was founded there was no more ardent hill walker. He was one of the first people to climb the higher hills in winter. Alexander was also the author of several guide books and articles for the Journal.

James McCoss joined the North Scottish Royal Garrison Artillery in June 1916, going to France in March 1917. James was in the Battle of Messines in June 1917, which is remembered for the detonation of 19 mines beneath the German front lines. This took the Germans by surprise and the allies were able to capitalise on it. The explosion was heard in Downing Street. He served with the artillery for the rest of the war and was at many notable battles including the crossing of the St. Quentin Canal. By the end of the war he had been promoted to sergeant. James wrote several articles for the Journal after the war, including one on the Matterhorn.

John MacDiarmid like Henry Butchart also served in Egypt. John rejoined as a Captain in the Royal Army Service Corps serving in Perthshire and Norfolk on transport work. He went to Salonika in January 1917, but plans changed, and all available personnel were sent to Palestine. He continued in his transport role and after the defeat of the Turkish army returned to Alexandria to work as Senior Supply Officer.

D. Ronald MacDonald joined as a despatch rider in June 1915 and took part in all the major engagements attached to the 4th Signal Company until the Armistice.

John McGregor had the shortest war service of any Club member. A major in the 6th Battalion Gordon Highlanders (TF) prior to the war,

he was mobilised in August 1914 but placed on the reserve list in November 1914 being deemed too old for active service.

John Nicol enlisted as a private in the Scots Guard in November 1915. He was involved in heavy fighting until the Armistice. John was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal and in his own words was “*wounded (slightly) twice and gassed once*”. In 1931 he was both Secretary and Treasurer of the Club.

Duncan Pirie's father lived in France and his mother was French. This background along with his public-school education, left him with a knowledge of French and Greek, useful in his future postings. He joined the army in 1887, serving in Egypt and Ceylon. In 1894 he married a daughter of Lord Semphill of Craigievar Castle. He became MP for North Aberdeen in 1896 and held the seat until 1918. Duncan served in the Boer War of 1889 to 1900. Service in the First World War led to promotion and the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. In 1916 he served in Macedonia and then became Commander of the British Garrison in Corfu. Duncan was made OBE (Military), awarded the Greek Order of the Redeemer and the Serbian Decoration of the White Eagle, unique honours for a Cairngorm Club member.

Charles Reid's war began earlier than most. A week before war was declared he was sent to the Torry Battery, Aberdeen. His job was to supervise, in feverish haste, the erection of wire entanglements and dig trenches. Charles left for France in February 1915 and was at Ypres when he fell, seriously wounded. His batman defied enemy fire and carried him to safety, receiving a Military Medal for his actions. Charles never forgot Duncan McLean, visiting twice yearly from London and remembering him in his will. Colonel Reid rejoined the battalion the following March but was wounded in the Somme offensive. He is recorded as remaining in command of his battalion throughout a heavy bombardment of gas shells despite being affected himself. Charles took over the command of a battalion of the GH for the Passchendaele offensive in July 1917. He was wounded for the third time, taking a machine-gun bullet through the jaw in April 1918 and was awarded the DSO.

Alexander Smith was another member keen to participate in the war effort but not eligible for active service. He was a lieutenant in the TF and became a Recruiting Officer in Aberdeen. Alexander served in that capacity from February 1916 until recruitment was taken over by the Ministry of National Service in 1918. This change in management reflects the changing role of conscription.

Arthur Landsborough Thomson served in France with the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders and then in the Headquarters of the 9th Division where in 1918 he was responsible for salvage, such as the recycling of shell cases. Arthur finished the war as Assistant Quartermaster General at General Headquarters with the rank of lieutenant colonel. He went on to be the Administrator of the Medical Research Council for 40 years and to gain a knighthood. He was a leading ornithologist, was president of the British Ornithologists' Union from 1948 to 1955 and an international expert in bird-ringing and migration.

Edward Watt was mobilised in August 1914, but it was August 1918 before he joined a Battalion of the GH in France. He had previously been part of the command of various reserve units of his regiment.

William Welsh, schoolmaster, was determined to enlist. He had been a sergeant in the TF and at the outbreak of war offered his services but was twice rejected by the Medical Board. He was eventually in charge of a platoon from the 1st Banffshire Volunteer Regiment.

Alexander M. Wilson was the only member of the Cairngorm Club to join the Royal Flying Corps (RFC). He was mobilised at the outbreak of the war and served with the 4th Battalion GH in France and Belgium. Wounded in Spring of 1915, he was fit to join the RFC in August. He flew a Maurice Farman biplane during training in Montrose. Alexander served for about a year as a flight commander and then moved into the technical work of aerodrome construction. He was to become Officer Commanding RAF Paris and was awarded the OBE (Military).

In this overview of the service and lives given by Club members in the First World War, the vigour and vitality of these men, in the mountains and at the commencement of war, both in mind and in body shines through. *Glorious Thistles* of Scotland indeed.

Author's Note: The author welcomes corrections or additions to the material in this article and should like to thank the Editor for her encouragement, the Committee for their support, and the Gordon Highlanders Museum for their enthusiasm.