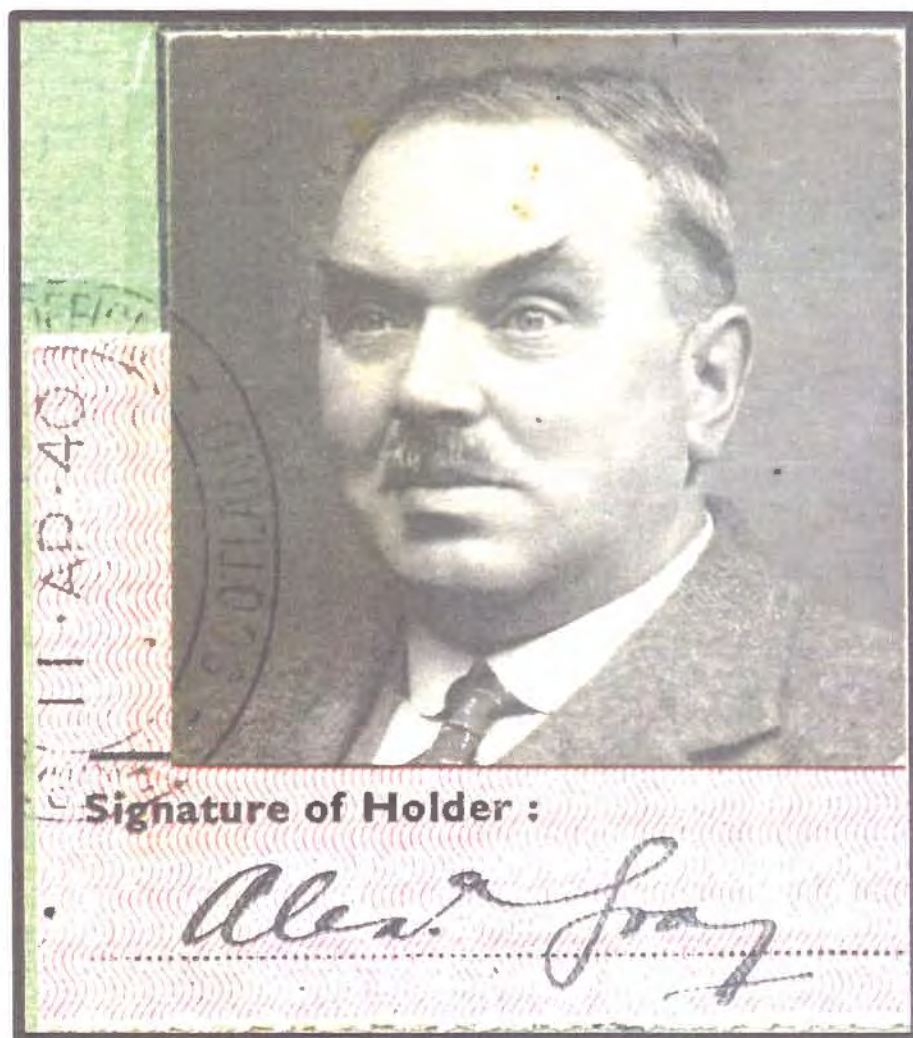


*'kings font'?*

# ALEXANDER ROSS GRAY



Born Paisley- November 6, 1898<sup>81</sup>

Died 'Benoran', - January 6, 1960

## PREFACE

My father, Alexander Ross Gray, died suddenly in the garden of his home at 'Benoran', Dornoch on January 6, 1960. He was 70 years old. I was 36.

Now, at 93 years old, I realise that I hardly knew him. Why? Looking at my own career, I realise that, apart from childhood and adolescent years, I was in his company for about four years. At the age of 18 and a half, I was called to the colours in March 1943 and served in the X Royal Air Force (with Bomber Command) until the end of hostilities in August 1945 and later in India Command until demobilised in April 1947.

In October of that year I embarked on University studies and Teacher Training for five years and took up my first teaching position on April 1, 1952.

On marriage in July 1953, I left the family home and soon after, in 1954, my father retired from his long career in journalism and, with my mother and sisters, Margaret and Eleanor, moved to his new home in Dornoch, Sutherland. Thereafter, distance and having no motor car, and the demands of my teaching career in Rosyth, Aberdeen and Lanark and of my own young family kept us largely apart until I officiated at his funeral in Dornoch in 1960.

As I have suggested, looking back from the later stages of my own life, I hardly knew him beyond my own childhood where he was simply my 'Dad'. Thus, I have embarked on a pilgrimage, as it were, trying to record his life with the aid of letters and documents of various kinds existing both with me and with my sisters Margaret and Eleanor in Dornoch and with such memories as we are able to recall. After all, it is, at this date February 28, 2018, 58 years since he died!

Gilbert Alastair Gray

*Extracts from written documents are printed in red.*

*\*\* indicates items in my possession.*



In Remembrance  
ALEXANDER GRAY  
DIED AT BENORANDORNOCH JANUARY 6TH 1960  
IN HIS 71ST YEAR  
HIS DEVOTED WIFE  
MINNIE FORSYTH  
DIED AT BENORAN 4TH APRIL 1983  
AGED 92

THOU WITH CHRIST AND CHRIST WITH ME  
SO TOGETHER STILL ARE WE

First, let me trace his antecedents.

On December 17, 1888, William Gray, aged 30, a journeyman slater was living at 33, Wellmeadow Street, Paisley. His antecedents were – as Census returns record - horticultural labourers in the north, viz., Sutherland, in the vicinity of Dornoch. Parents were Thomas Gray (b. 26.10.1818; d. 7.7.1895) and Margaret (Ross) Gray (b.10.4.1824; d.15.7. 1865) in the parish of Creich. Going back a generation, his Grandparents were Peter Gray (b. 1791) and Anne (Murray) Gray (b. 1791). Peter had been in the army and was a Pensioner Annuitant. James Gray, also a farmer, and Belle (Sutherland) Gray were his Great- Grandparents living at Achuilie.

William himself was born in Clashmugach, a hamlet beside Clashmore, west of Dornoch on the Skibo Estate in the Parish of Creich.. The Census of 1861 records him as a boy of 4 years old with three older brothers – Peter (11), Donald (9) and Thomas (7) and a young sister Johan (2). Ten years later, aged 14, he is recorded as living next door with his uncle and acting as 'herd boy'. This is corroborated by his own personal statement:

*I have started pipe playing at the age of 14 with my uncle Mr John Gordon. I was a herd boy in Clashmugach above Skibo Castle now the property of And. Carnegie and although Uncle J Gordon could only play two tunes I still thought him the best of pipers and would follow him to the village (Clashmore) at any hour.*

That same year, His oldest brother Peter, then 21, took him to Inverness to learn a trade, that trade being slater in a family business which <sup>developed into</sup> became an established building contractor in Inverness. His devotion to the pipes continued and his brother gave him his first real set to allow him to compete in the piping classes at Nairn in 1885. Thereafter, he won many prizes at the Highland Games and also the prestigious Gold medal at Inverness in 1880. Later in life he wrote ...*I have in all won 72 medals and other prizes ..... has now retired from competitions and is now a Judge of piping and dancing and composer and writer of bagpipe music (sic).*

However, in the early eighties, he joined the army and with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the Black Watch served in the Egyptian Campaign of 1881/82 and was soon the Battalion's Pipe Major. He won the Piping Championship of the army in 1886 and was proud to have played before *Queen Victoria, King Edward VII, the Crown Prince of Portugal, Emperor of Germany, also of Russia, Lord Londonderry, Prince Edward of Germany, and all the nobilities of the land.*

William returned to civilian life and, as a journeyman slater, was living at 33, Wellmeadow Street, Paisley in the late 1880's where he met Mary Ann Milne, also aged 30, then working as a domestic servant in Kilmacolm, a few miles away in Ayrshire.

Mary was born in 1858 at Fettercairn, the second of four children born to Alexander Milne (b. 14.10.1830) at Marykirk and Jane Walker (b. 1840 at Kineff) in the old county of Angus. Her father was a ploughman at Thainstone near Fettercairn and, in 1860, was awarded a Highland Society of Scotland medal at a local ploughing match\*\*



Mum and her long-widowed twin sister, Margaret, were now the last survivors of the large Forsyth family - five brothers and four sisters. Auntie Maggie, with whom we as children had spent many happy holidays on the croft at Balvraid, was widowed in 1944 when husband Uncle Will died of cancer and had since lived in Clashmore a few miles west of Dornoch. Living alone, she too was now in decline and required a degree of care and attention so Margaret and Eleanor were kept busy looking after two Old Age Pensioners.

In 1972, Daphne and I with the family had visited the twins on their 80<sup>th</sup> birthday on March 28<sup>th</sup> and we repeated the exercise ten years later for their 90<sup>th</sup>.



Here they are in Auntie Maggie's sitting room.

In 1973, we visited Benoran at Easter time. On April 4<sup>th</sup>, before setting off for home, we were in Mum's bedroom to say goodbye. She was sitting cheerily in her wicker bedroom chair with her shawl about her shoulders when she suddenly passed away as she chatted.



We hastened home to Lanark return a few days later to attend her funeral. At the Cathedral organ, Eleanor played the air of a favourite Robert Burns verse - 'Ae fond kiss and then we sever, Ae fond kiss and then forever'. The cortege moved to the cemetery where she was interred beside Dad and alongside her ancestors.



Her mother, Jane Milne, is seen (left) with her grand-daughter Eleanor Ramsay Gray aged about 7, c 1907.

William and Mary married in Paisley on December 14, 1888.

Their first-born, Alexander Ross - Dad - was born on November 6, 1889. His birth certificate gives the family address as 9, Great Hamilton Street, Paisley; (below, left)



Other children soon arrived. The family photograph (above, right) was taken about 1907.

Alexander Ross Gray (seated, centre) - aged about 18

James Milne Gray (standing left) – born at Greenock – July 6, 1892

Margaret Jane Gray (standing right) – born at 15, Barossa Street, Perth - January 23, 1895

Eleanor Ramsay Gray (seated, right) – born at 302 High Street, Perth – February 29, 1900



Thus, it seems that during his first 11 years, Alexander experienced four flittings!

With the family firmly installed in Perth, Alex attended the Northern District School as evidenced by the award in July 1901 of 1<sup>st</sup> Prize for Arithmetic in class 1, senior – a book entitled 'To Greenland and the Pole' by Gordon Stables. \*\*



At School: Alexander Ross Gray - second row, fifth from right.

\*

X was

The family were attached to St Andrews Church where they attended Sabbath School. In July 1900, aged 11, he had been awarded 1<sup>st</sup> Prize for 'Merit, Diligence and Attendance' - 'Missionary Travels' by David Livingston. \*\* The following year, in June 1901, a certificate states that 'Alexander Gray obtained a percentage of 78 marks in the competition for Session 1900-01 for repetition of Scripture and in July he was awarded 1<sup>st</sup> Prize for 'Merit, Diligence and Attendance'. That prize was repeated the following year - 'Typee - A Romance of the South Seas' by Herman Melville. \*\* In June 1905, Alex., now aged 16, was in the Advanced Class and awarded first prize 'for written work' - 'Glimpses into Plant Life'. \*\*

In 1905/6, he was also a member of the 6<sup>th</sup> Perth Company of the Boys' Brigade and in its 'Young Men's Bible Class' and at the end of the session, for 'Perfect Attendance and Good Conduct' his prize was 'My Schools and Schoolmasters' by Hugh Miller \*\*. 'The Poetical Works of Wordsworth' \*\* was his prize for 'Perfect Attendance' at the Church Bible Class in Session 1909/10 – aged 20

The level of literacy demanded of young people in those days is quite remarkable, as witnessed again by the prize awarded to Alex's younger sister Margaret ('Meg' within the family, but 'Maggie' within the school!) on June 26, 1908. At the age of 13, she was in the senior department of Sharp's Institution and had been awarded Second Prize for Arithmetic – 'Ivanhoe' by Sir Walter Scott! \*\*

Well endowed scholastically, the family showed other attributes. Apart from his piping expertise, Alex was a swimmer, playing water polo, swimming in the river Tay. For example,

I remember him mentioning exercising on the rings in the swimming pool and swimming around Moncrieffe Island. He also engaged in athletics. His brother, Jim, was a footballer who earned a trial with Glasgow Rangers. His sister Ellie, played the piano and was a country dancer, though later plagued with illness. Meg was a cook.

In the meantime, Alex, aged 16, had left school and taken up employment in the Balhousie Works with Coats Brothers Ltd. When he left in October 1907, he received the following testimonial from his employers:

Balhousie Works

Perth

12<sup>th</sup> October, 1907

*This is to certify that Alexander Gray has been in our employment as an apprentice clerk for 3 ½ years. During that period he has shown more than ordinary ability in meeting the various details of office work and has given every promise of becoming a first rate clerk. His penmanship is specially good, and he has performed the whole of his work in such a way as to give entire satisfaction. We have also much pleasure in stating that he has proved himself to be a lad of exemplary character and behaviour. He leaves our employment of his own accord.*

Yours faithfully

COATES BROTHERS Ltd.

J. Robertson, Secretary

Alex is now approaching his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday and has changed his job – but where???

\*

From his early childhood, his father had tutored him on the <sup>bag</sup> pipes and at the age of 11 he was a winner in a piping competition. He continued to develop his craft and competed regularly, often successfully, at Highland Gatherings. A medal, 1<sup>st</sup> for playing marches, dates from 1904, aged 14. A handsome gold watch is dated 29.1.12. and on the following July 6, aged 23, he won the Strathspey and Reels piping competition at the Blantyre Amateur Highland Games. \*\* He was gold medal winner at Birnam Highland Games (1913) and again in the following year and the gold medal he won there dangled from his watch chain throughout the rest of his life.



He states that he was often accompanied by an 'old chaperone' who shared his 'digs' in Kirkcaldy and whom Alex describes as being 'pipes mad'.



Left: winner of piping competition  
- aged 11

Right : cup\*\*winner of piping  
competition at Blantyre Highland  
Games on July 6 1912  
Strathspeys and Reels - Aged 23.



\*

During this period of Alex's life great events had taken place

1887: Queen Victoria celebrated her Jubilee on June 1, and her Diamond Jubilee ten years later;

1890: on March 4 the great cantilever Forth Bridge was opened;

1895: Marconi sent his first message over a mile by wireless;

1899: October 1 saw the start of the Boer War;

1901: Queen Victoria died on January 22 and was succeeded by Edward VII;

1903: December 17 - Orville and Wright flew the first heavier-than-air machine;

1906: San Francisco was destroyed by an earthquake and fire on April 1;

1909: Bleriot made the first cross-Channel flight;

1910: on the death of Edward VII, George V succeeded to the throne.

\*

Alex had now entered the employment of 'The Courier and Advertiser' based in Dundee as a member of the editorial staff at a time when Europe was in a state of unrest.

War had been declared on Germany on August 4, 1914, when he was aged 25. Six months later, on Thursday, February 4, 1915, that newspaper published a full-page supplement headed:

*'Over a Hundred Members of Courier Staff Join the Colours'*

The text read:-

*'107 MEMBERS of the Courier Staff are now serving their Country on land and sea. This is the largest number from any Newspaper Office in Scotland. Some are in France, some in Belgium, some in India, some in Egypt, some on the North Sea...indeed they are serving wherever the foe threatens the Empire. Many of them are scattered throughout the British Isles working with eagerness to fit themselves to take their places in the battle-front. Every one of the 107 carries with him the best wishes of his Courier comrades.'*

The page displays numbered head and shoulder photos of each man and at number 28 is the portrait of 'A. Ross Gray'. It seems that my father was one of the millions of enthusiastic young men who rushed to join the 'colours' in the early days of the 'First World War' - indeed before war was declared!



Now known to the army as 'Gray, A. Ross', 9273, he had joined the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion Cameron Highlanders (Territorial Force) in September 1914 as shown on his 'dog tags'\*\*)

The little volume "11<sup>th</sup> Battalion - Gordon Highlanders - 1914-1916" published in 1916, records that, on February 12, 1915, *'Pipe-Major A. Ross Gray, 11<sup>th</sup> Battalion Gordon Highlanders joined us and took over charge of our pipe band'*. His regimental sgean dubh\*\*) remains in my possession.



The battalion was stationed, first in hutments in King Street, and then in the children's hospital, Aberdeen, where it became *'part of a Reserve Infantry Brigade .....to provide drafts for the New Army battalions of the Gordon Highlanders at the front.'*

On May 23, the battalion moved to Dornoch where they were billeted in the County Buildings, the old Parish School, and the Free Church Hall. The Sergeants Mess was in the Carnegie Hall. This posting was to prove very influential in his future life!! It is written that *'the battalion found Dornoch an agreeable place to be quartered in, the people being so hospitable'*.



Alex certainly found it so! During his later war service in France, he wrote many letters to 'Dear Minnie' and he frequently states his love for Dornoch, its district and its folks. He was patently in love with Dornoch - indeed until his dying day.

X, as At this time, there were many soldiers encamped in the Dornoch area. Many were American and Canadian men brought over as lumberjacks to fell the timber required to furnish the trenches at the battle front in France and Belgium. There was much fraternising between them and the local lassies and, of course, the tartan of the locally based highland regiment would have been an irresistible attraction!



The photo above taken during the Great War about 1915 shows three of the local Clashmore girls fraternising in the grounds of Skibo castle – twins Williamina and Margaret Forsyth on left and sister Johann Forsyth playing the violin.

X No doubt these young ladies were among those of the district <sup>who</sup> ventured into Dornoch when the Gordon Highlanders pipe band was playing in the Square and, from his letters written later from France, Pipe Major Alexander Gray had obviously fallen for Minnie Forsyth.

In his letters to Minnie from the war zone in France two years later, he reminisces frequently on his experiences with people and places and events in which he had participated in and around Clashmore, e.g.;

*23.7.17 from France: How did that great Red Cross Week go off? Dornoch and Clashmore must have been throbbing with patriotism once again. I'll bet there was a good attendance - nay an overflowing attendance - at the tea in Clashmore Hall, eh? By jove I couldn't half 'go' one of these now - such as the one we got after the concert two years ago when old MacD (a fellow piper) and I strutted over the platform! Remember? We were 'gay' that night! And what a stroll home after being in Sandy Murray's! I wish I were poetical to express myself on these good old times!*

*And 23.9.17....I suppose you'll all be trekking to Dorn. to church along that sweet-smelling road. The scent of the nice sprigs of (I forget the name - the stuff that grows in front of the Castle) is still on your notepaper which I've just re-read to refresh my memory, Minnie. Thanks very much for it and the sprig o' white heather. May it bring the best of luck'.*



X Spun



Williamina (Minnie) Forsyth  
Portrait inscribed -  
' Skibo Castle - Nov. 1<sup>st</sup> 1915'

Minnie lived in the village of Clashmore, about six miles west of Dornoch. She and twin sister Maggie were the youngest members of the large Forsyth family. Their ancestors hailed from the hamlet of Clashmugach, adjacent to Clashmore where great-grandfather William Forsyth (born 1764, died 1851) was a 'farmer of 14 acres'. He and his wife Ann (born 1774, died 1849) raised four sons and two daughters, one of whom, John (born 1805, died 1864) married Johan Matheson (born 1813, died 1875). They, in turn, produced two sons and daughters. William, Minnie's father, was born in 1843 and he married Margaret Ross (born 1851) in July 1873.



X  
Shaving

Gravestone in Dornoch Churchyard marking the  
burial place of William Forsyth's parents.

JOHN FORSYTH

Died at Clashmugach, December 27, 1864,

AGED 58 years

Single spanning

Also

His beloved wife

JOHAN MATHESON

Died 7<sup>th</sup> May, 1875, AGED 63 years

The village of Clashmore, was situated within the ancient Skibo Estate which was bought by the steel magnate and later philanthropist, Andrew Carnegie, as a holiday home in 1898.

William Forsyth was one of the tenant farmers while Minnie and eldest sister, Johann, worked in the castle.



Left: Minnie's parents (about 1890) and, below, the family croft at Clashmore.



\*

However, the War raged on in France, Belgium and elsewhere and it seems that Alex and his Battalion were posted to France - as indeed was his brother, Jim, <sup>according to his letters</sup> whom he actually met on occasion in the battle zone within, probably, the much fought-over Ypres salient.



Alex. Gray (left) and brother Jim, with mother and sisters Meg (standing) and Ellie - (about 1915)

*see 2p 21*



Several letters from Alex to Minnie from France exist\*\*, the first being written on July 23, 1917. It was a time when there several important actions. The 'slaughterhouse' of the battle of the Somme had lasted from July to November the previous year and in 1917, major battles continued: Arras and the capture of the Vimy Ridge in April; the taking of the Messines Ridge in June. There followed the Third battle of Ypres in late July, but in between the major recorded events there was much skirmishing. Was Alex involved? Letters from the soldiers, usually scribbled in pencil on flimsy note paper under faint lighting, were heavily censored to remove confidential detail and it was not easy to find a time or a place to write a reply to mail received. However, from Alex. there are hints of combat experience!

*23.7.17 In these days, however, I suppose excuses are unnecessary for apparent delays in answering correspondence. So long as we answer with a whole hide that is the main thing, eh? Fortune has smiled on us so far altho' the matter of an hour recently might have seen us share the fate of others.*

*23.9.17: How's your brother? Still sharing the best of luck I trust. We all look for it anyway. It was miraculously generous to me recently. Those bombs are ever so much worse than all the shells. I'll never forget the experience. Ghastly scenes sometimes*

*3.4.18: Many thanks for your p.c. which had a welcome reception the other day. If you sent two it was the one add. to the Batt. I got as I am now back again. Those sort of jobs are discontinued since these terrible times are upon us and very soon I'll be in the grim struggle with the rest. Isn't it awful?*



*Before I go further allow me to ask how your brother has fared. From what I have his (and my bro's too of course) Div. had a rough passage and so far as I can judge have made glory for themselves but what is that compared with dear life, eh? I hope your bro., if he was there, got thro' all right. And ever so many more from that area must have been in it - probably Mrs McK's hubby! Poor chap. Well, well, they are hard times but we have to get thro' them if we are to continue in existence, only it's a great pity things are allowed to be as they are.*

*21.5.18: Will never forget the 18<sup>th</sup> April tho'. Oh dear, dear! One wouldn't expect a fly to live there but the supreme power guides omnipotently.*

Minnie's brother, John Forsyth (left) had, in fact, been wounded at Beaumont Hamel in November 1916 and invalided home to hospital from where he had described his experience of action in graphic detail in a letter to his parents.(see 'Family Gathering').

Despite the savagery of the battlefield, Alex found time to marvel at things natural.



3.4.18: *As I look round and see traces of verdant nature amid the wreckage of war it does make one horrified. And all the birds singing so gay and the butterflies on the wing. The weather tho. again cold and bleak has been unusually nice recently - in fact everything seems to favour those cursed enemies of the human race.*

21.5.18: *I've been enjoying the music of the cuckoo recently and listening to the nightingale at night and the lovely sweet smelling hedges and trees, and to think the war goes on. One of the most remarkable things of that terrible day (18<sup>th</sup>) was the singing of the lark thro' all the din and smoke of the bombardment. It was pleasant and yet sad. Everything is looking lovely where we are and it does the heart good to feast upon Nature just now.*

He had received a pleasant surprise - a photo from Minnie!



*Where did you get that one taken? Awful nice but (am I right?) you've got somewhat stouter? Seem to be much fuller about the face, anyway, eh? Wonder if I would know you again, eh? If I'd get that kiss at the end I daresay I would!! If I'd only been at Skibo again! Daresay it would have been livelier than 1916 Minnie, eh? Anyway thanks ever so much for the photo and I hope I won't lose it.*

\*

His position as regards Regiment, Battalion, rank, duties is a little unsure at this time and for a time he is not associated with a band as piper, or pipe major. He has been Platoon Sergeant dealing with more urgent combat matters in the field.

23.7.17: *When you speak of the pipes - and others too - it seems to touch me to the quick, Minnie, when I think of how I had to desert my dearest pastime. But I'm glad to say that at present I'm waiting a transfer to a Gordon Bn. To serve in my old rank.*

He signs off his letter of this date as A.R.Gray, Sgt.

6.11.17: *I've been shifting about a lot recently and it's a pity I didn't tell you to address them (parcels) as follows - 1<sup>st</sup> C.H., (Cameron Highlanders), 1<sup>st</sup> Division Railhead, B.E.F. I've been there for a time and don't know how long I may yet manage to remain. However there would be no harm addressing them such and if I'm back to the Batt., they will be forwarded..... As to my future I can't say. I may tackle a Comm. (Commission?) too later but I'm to stick out the winter first. I'm sorry to say my transfer has not been granted by the higher authorities. The best explanation I can offer is that of the crimsonest hue of red tape! I have become so resigned to the future that I don't feel the hardship quite so much but at times I do feel awful especially when I hear a band. It's cruel really. But I've been fortunate in other ways so far and I hope it continues.*



*26.9.18: I am not now a Cameron!! Lots of things have happened within the last month or six weeks and all to my advantage. To cut it short my address is now Drum Major - 1/4<sup>th</sup> Seaforth Hldrs, B.E.F. Am getting on tip top and have already earned hopeful praise from my superiors. As you will observe I'm in with a lot of the lads from the north. The majority of the band of course belong to Dingwall but there are a couple of pipers from Thurso and one from Brora. All very nice indeed. In fact I've just ceased an afternoon's teaching in dancing in which they are keen. I may say there is not much assistance given in any direction by the P.M. (Pipe Major) but he'll get a shake up one of these days! So we never tho't I'd be in this lot did we? I just missed the P.M.-ship of the 5<sup>th</sup> too, but for position this is better of course.*

In May of 1918, the weather was terrifically hot which made marching with full pack and dealing with other military duties very hard work. However, life now appeared to be more relaxed since the war was reaching its conclusion. In October Alex was thinking of going on leave but was reluctant to leave France in case he would miss the celebrations should the war end. On October 7, 1918, he suggests to Minnie that she and her friends would all be looking forward to the end of hostilities when all old friends would be returning. Jestingly, he feared that they, as outsiders, Gordons and Seaforths wouldn't have a look in!!

He added that he had heard it said, unofficially, that firing would cease along the line that night. In his postscript, he writes (as Drum Major):

*You ought to be here, Minnie. We play every day - in fact all the bands in Div. do so, so there's no lack of music, eh? While it is certainly a more prominent position I now occupy I'd rather be playing as before. I'd make a big difference if had my way.*

November 11, 1918, Alex wrote to Minnie:

*Altho' it is only a few days since I wrote you much has happened since. If I was in private wire with Skibo I could tell you the glad news but ere this reaches you it will have dawned on a new world. Yes, who can believe it - the magic word 'Peace'. Isn't it grand to think that we have gained such a glorious and decisive triumph. Last night (Sunday) I paid my bro' a visit and while they had not the fresh news when I left, a dispatch rider who overtook me later couldn't contain himself when passing me, without blurting out, 'Jerry has signed the Armistice, Jock'. It will be a memorable night.*

Alex soon had his overdue leave arranged but first priority was his mother and sisters at home in Perth with Minnie a 'possible'.

*Listen! I leave here (or wherever we may be before then and perhaps on the frontier, eh!! on Sunday next (17<sup>th</sup>) and should reach London on Tuesday. I'm trying to induce my mother to travel to London, spend a holiday with my uncle there and meet me. I hope she does. What scenes there will be there today, eh? Now, I'm almost determined to come north and see you all but I'll probably drop you a note from Perth as to my ultimate hopes. In any case, I'll take my ticket through to Brora. If I do come, I'll possibly come off at Tain and cross the ferry. Honest this time Minnie. And it won't be too much to cherish the hope of seeing you at the other side eh? Oh yes sure! And I s'pose I'd better bring the "phiab mhor" and see if I still have the charm of 'drawing' Hugh's tears as McCrimmon!*



As Drum Major, it had been some time since he had played the pipes seriously.

\*

Did he ever reach Dornoch and Clashmore? In his letter to Minnie of January 30, 1919 there are hints which suggest that he did.

*'You never gave me the chance of a dance all the time I was there!!! Our organisation was slow, really, not to have a dance before we left Dornoch wasn't it?*

After New Year, Alex's unit had now moved camp to a base ten miles east of Mons in Belgium where he was lodged in private billets and where they lived in every comfort and were *'killed with kindness'*.

← Feb 1919  
Valenciennes

*'Plenty of theatre, cinemas and every other house is a café, where there is dancing nearly all day long. Sunday is the day of all days. Oh la! la!!! Sunday is the day of all days. It is the day when there are the best shows at the theatre etc and everyone indulges in pleasure.*

*As a matter of fact there was a Divisional Band Competition as well as individual piping and dancing competitions held here last Sunday.....And your humble got 1<sup>st</sup> Prize of pibrochs too so I go to Valenciennes about the middle of February to represent the Division at the Army Championships there. With only about ten days' preparation too!!.....I'm really back at my favourite hobby again - P.M (Pipe Major), altho. I'm doing both jobs*

Two days after the Championships another honour came Alex's way. He was selected to play before the Prince of Wales who was dining with General Carter Campbell at the Divisional Headquarters at Chateau Bock, at La Louviere. After speaking to Alex, H.R.H. graciously gave him his autograph and presented him with three copies of the programme. Alex states that he gave the Prince of Wales a good Gaelic toast - 'Sons of the Gael, shoulder to shoulder'. ("Cleann nan Gudhail, guiliah ri Guilach"). He vowed to have the autograph framed. ^ develop!

At the beginning of March, 1919, he was in Germany, his Battalion being suddenly moved to a new area as part of the Army of the Rhine. Having travelled via Charleroi, Namur and Liege, on Saturday, the 8<sup>th</sup>, in a nicely equipped German express, they steamed into Cologne dominated by *'the spires of whose great cathedral were seen in bold relief to everything else'*. He was able to visit the cathedral and the great bridge over the river Rhine. In a letter to his mother, he describes aspects of this new environment.

*In Cologne, which reminds you of life in London or Glasgow, men, women, girls, etc. never cast eyes upon you and you seem to read in their faces the feeling of hatred and disdain. There's no such thing as the 'glad eye' here, I can tell you! The chief difficulty is with the language. We can't get away from the French. My people (with whom he ~~was~~ billeted in Belgium) were visibly sorry when I left and I hope to be able to pay a visit there again. They were up late the night before I left baking and carried my things down to the car for me in the morning.*

On the 9<sup>th</sup>, the Battalion moved on again, and after hanging around at several junctions, arrived at a place called Golzheim.



*Just a tiny country place like Balbeggie, with billets not too good. However, it may turn out all right. I don't s'pose we'll be here long. The people have a holy terror at the sight of the kilt which again shows the remarkable way they have been fed with Berlin lies. They are finding they don't get any coddling and fraternising from the Jock as I believe they did from a confounded English regiment who has left.*

He signs his letter.....'Well, well, Minnie my best love and drop a letter soon again. Au revoir. Always affectionately, Alasdair.'

•

In this letter, in a brief footnote, he states that has written to 'Jim' from Belgium and also to Barbara's brother 'Willy'. He had got a reply from Willie from Brora but no word from 'Jim'.

^

Barbara, Willy and Jim Gray were cousins of Alex who lived at StrathSteven, near Brora. Family research has revealed Jim's career. He was born at the Doll, Clyne Brora on May 12, 1890. Aged 19, he emigrated to New Zealand where he was a horse-breaker. He enlisted in the New Zealand Army on August 15, 1914. On October 16, he embarked for Egypt on the troopship 'Athenic' and reached Alexandria in Egypt to start his military training and took part in military engagements against the Turks in the Canal Zone.

^ and military disasters

On April 9, 1915 he embarked for the Dardanelles where he landed on April 25 where he was wounded in August during the heavy fighting there and evacuated to military hospital first in Cairo and then in the UK at Hampstead.

^

With his Battalion, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, Canterbury Regiment, New Zealand Expeditionary Force, Lance Corporal James Gray embarked for France on April 6, 1916 and was initially located at Armentieres. On September 16, as part of the New Zealand 1<sup>st</sup> Division engaged in the latter days of the 'Battle of the Somme', he was killed in action.

\*

In May, Alex. was in Malmedy where his 4<sup>th</sup> Seaforth band was taking part at the presentation of colours to the 9<sup>th</sup> Seaforths, but another letter to his mother written on June 13, 1919 tells us that he has been home on leave but has now returned to his German base where the heat was terrific. He had returned from Perth via London where he had visited his aunt and uncle (Gertie and Willie) in South Norwood and in so doing, had missed the Trooping of the King's Colours in Hyde Park. However, the next day he set out for Epsom where he saw the Derby. His Channel crossing was 'perfect' and he got 'home' to his base where 'pipey' was welcomed back after a 13 hour journey from Calais. He remarks on the transformation in the former battlefield areas through which he passed.

*All around Armentieres, Bailleul, Haazebrouck and along the banks of the Lys where there had been such continuous fighting - this time last year, the Bosche was trying hard for Mont Kemmel Hill there - everything is changing. Trenches are being rapidly filled in, barbed wire is almost unseen and dugouts are being torn down and filled in too. What was once desolate No Man's Land is now ploughed fields. Wonderful! The only traces of war that remain are the shattered villages, ruined bridges, torn trees - and the ubiquitous white crosses. At Armentieres, there is a terrible size of a cemetery, the silent testimony of many a fierce fight.*



Two days later he was back in Malmedy - a journey of about 45 miles in military transport - with his band of 15 pipers and 11 drummers. They were contributing to the ceremony of the presentation of colours to the 9<sup>th</sup> Seaforths. He was pleased to be back in French-speaking territory where he could make use of his knowledge of the language.



4<sup>th</sup> Seaforths band - Pipe Major Gray front row, extreme left - probably May 1918

The letter intimates two of his special loves - other than the pipes - gardening and music. He asks his mother in Perth how all the lettuces, cabbages, etc. are coming forward. When in London, he had taken great interest in his Aunt Emmae's flowers and fruits, and now, in Malmedy where he was billeted with a German professor of music.....

*I haven't time to tell Ellie (his piano-playing sister) all about it just now but he could make the piano speak! He played a lovely waltz from what he called the 'modern music'. I had selections from Lohengrin, Weber, Liszt, Wagner, and whatever is said of German music, there is no doubt it is wonderful stuff.*

On June 14, he was judging an under-20's piping competition at the 53<sup>rd</sup> Gordons (late 11<sup>th</sup> Gordons) Sports.

Alex was awaiting his Colonel's return from leave when it was expected that he would have information about a forthcoming Paris trip!! It was to be something special!

On Friday, July 10, 1919 he is in Paris and writing to his mother from the British Army and Navy Leave Club after a tedious 36 hour train journey with his band from Germany. It had been an eventful journey. At Charleroi his train had been derailed and two carriages toppled but no one had been hurt. On the 14th he was Pipe Major at the head of his band leading the British contingent in the great Victory parade of the Allies through Paris. He wrote to his mother:

*By jove it is to be the sight of a life time this. What decorations. I question if ever London had such gorgeous displays. And such fine broad thoroughfares (boulevards). I hear the procession will be about four miles long and is arranged in alphabetical order - America, Belgium, Britain and so on. There are troops of every clime here - even Arabs and Africans. All the British Army are encamped just outside the city and the native area beside us.*

*We are fortunate to be chosen to be here and me in full charge too!*

*You'll be seeing the whole thing on the pictures, no doubt. I hear photos are being taken to London and Glasgow by aeroplane so there will be little time lost in producing them.*

*Already it is evident on every hand that the Jocks are again the favourites. The dress of course catches the eye everywhere and up goes the shout, "Vive les Ecossais"! In the Leave Club here tonight a lady who has visited Scotland a lot was telling me she was so afraid they wouldn't have any Highlanders in the procession and was overjoyed when she heard of the big band we had bro't down.*







(Post card received from a friend in Brittany- found in a flea market)

On August 7<sup>th</sup>, he was taking part in Highland Brigade Games at Duren, near Cologne. He won the Highland Dancing competition - prize, a silver fruit bowl which, some five years later, is reputed to have become the family baptismal bowl.



The war over, Alex returned to journalism. He is now Mr A. Ross Gray of the editorial staff of the "Courier and Advertiser" published by John Leng & Co. of Dundee allocated to cover the West Fife district. He was resident in Dunfermline at 56, Brucefield Avenue, Dunfermline.

However, he hasn't totally severed his connection with the Seaforths.

It is recorded in a newspaper cutting that '*a member of the "Courier" editorial staff, Mr A. Ross Gray, had a signal compliment paid him by the Prince of Wales.*' He was on parade with other ex-members of his regiment outside the Seaforth Club at Park Place and received a cordial handshake from the Prince who was reminded of - and remembered - their earlier meeting in 1919 in France.

\*

Meanwhile, back in Clashmore, the Forsyth family were in the news. The owner of the Skibo estate, Andrew Carnegie had died in 1919 and Minnie had been informed on August 3, 1920 that she was to be a beneficiary from his mighty estate. A letter from the USA, dated February 27, 1920 arrived with a long dossier of those beneficiaries. Among them were four of the Forsyth family, covering three generations: Minnie Forsyth and her eldest sister Johan (both of Skibo), her father William (Clashmore) and her grandfather, also William (Clashmugach).

\*

..... And, of course, the romance had blossomed!

On June, 21, 1921, a Proclamation of Marriage was read in St Leonard's Church, Dunfermline: Alexander Gray, journalist, 56, Brucefield Avenue, Dunfermline and Minnie Forsyth, Clashmore, Dornoch. On July 5<sup>th</sup> a similar Proclamation was read in the Parish Church, Dornoch, presumably the Cathedral.

They were married in Clashmore's Carnegie Hall on July 8, 1921 by the Rev. John Macleod.



But where is Father Gray?!!!!!! For some reason, William Gray had disappeared from the scene!





Left:

They honeymooned in Aberdeen - the Imperial Hotel.

Is this the happy couple on honeymoon?

After their marriage, Alex and Minnie had several addresses within a short time.

X First - 39, Bridge Street, Dunfermline, the address from which they sent 'with compliments' cards following (one assumes) receipt of wedding gifts and then

c/o Miss Stewart, 19, Lady Campbell's Walk, Dunfermline, an address to which Mr and Mrs Roswell Millar, for Mrs Andrew Carnegie, sent an acknowledgement.

But then came a more permanent move, probably 1923, to Dundee. 9, Upper Constitution Street was to be their home until 1927.

7 On September 13, 1924, they became 'Mum' and 'Dad' with the arrival of a son to be named Gilbert Alistair after St Gilbert, Patron Saint of Dornoch.



Within a few months he was whisked north to Clashmore in Dad's motor bike with sidecar to meet Grandparents Forsyth.



Margaret Mary arrived on June 20, 1928





On his appointment to cover the West Fife area for the 'Courier and Advertiser' Mum and Dad set up home in Rosyth at 13, Leslie Road (below). Our neighbours were the Gellatly's and their two boys. Mr Gellatly was destined to become Provost of Dunfermline while, in the 1970's, I renewed my acquaintance with the older son who was a headmaster of a Primary School in Lanarkshire.



After a short time we moved again. We followed the tramcar route north a couple of miles to Dunfermline..... to 72, Townhill Road. The house was situated opposite a 'siding' on the tramway line where trams passed each other - always a source of interest! It was a roomy house with garden back and front where there was always room to play.

Just before Christmas, 1928, mother disappeared to the Davaar Nursing Home but reappeared with our new sister, Joan Eleanor, born 22<sup>nd</sup> December.



We were in that home for seven years. Each of us children succumbed in turn to measles, scarlet fever, and chickenpox, house regularly fumigated and regularly visited by the formidable Dr Tuke. Mother, a fine baker and cook produced good, simple and nourishing fare. Her early experience as seamstress in Skibo Castle served to keep us children well clad. The occasional pair of rabbits, wrapped in parcel paper came through the post from Uncle Will and Auntie Maggie at Balvraid, near Dornoch, where they worked a croft, while Dad, from his travels at work in his 'plus-fours', would produce a chicken or eggs occasionally over and above the products of his kitchen garden.

\*

There was some excitement when Dad brought home his first Company car to replace the old bike and sidecar so he was able to take us on picnics and other trips to more distant places.



Left: Paddling with Dad in the river Devon.

Right: Mum with her 'chickens' and distant relative, Netta Haggart, at Balvraid.



\*

We looked forward to the annual summer holiday to stay with Auntie Maggie and Uncle Will at Balvraid travelling the many miles via the old 'great North road' where, in those days, it was possible to picnic by a burn at the roadside and brew tea with the Primus stove. A visit to the seaside at Aberdour was a favourite, as was the outing to Glendevon where we paddled or built dams in the river Devon. Much time was spent playing on our swing in the garden or going shopping down the steep hills into town with Mum.



Left: family with 'Ma' and cousin Hamish at 172 Townhill Road, Dunfermline - c1929

Tram car when older

) sp



Right:

Mum and Dad with Grandfather Forsyth  
at Balvraid c1930



Dad's work kept him busy much of the day, out and about picking up stories for the newspaper, typing them up or developing and printing his photographs at home, and getting his material ready to send to the Dundee office from the station in Upper Station Road where his office was situated. Occasionally, when I was very young, he would take me with him into his small, congested office where he worked alongside his fellow journalist, John Murdoch. It was a rather dingy, smoky place. Dad seldom smoked cigarettes but was partial to an occasional cigar or cheroot! The office was shared with the lads like the 'simple' Johnny Purvis who collected their bundles of evening papers like 'The Telegraph' to sell on the streets. In later years, when I was more responsible, he would trust me to go down to the station to deliver his 'copy' to the train for transfer to head office in Dundee. I sometimes accompanied him to home football matches involving Dunfermline Athletic or Cowdenbeath, lodging myself beside him in the primitive reporters' boxes and sometimes running errands for him. Having a reporter's access to the Dunfermline Opera House, he regularly took the family to enjoy their shows to see current stage stars. Charlie Kemble and Dave Willis, comedians, and Robert Wilson, a remarkable tenor, were favourites.

At home, he enjoyed playing tricks on Mum and ourselves - always soft-spoken and seldom angry. He joined or instigated family fun. He enjoyed music and would bring out his old drumsticks and 'paradiddle' on an upturned saucer to accompany the rhythm. He was a handyman and I learned much from him in the use of tools and materials. He had his garden to tend and other DIY activities. He attended a course in woodworking in Lauder Technical College. He made his first radio set to which we struggled to listen through earphones. He made his own enlarger and developed and printed his own photographs. His time exposures were controlled by means of holding his hat for 'x' seconds over the lens! 'Flash' photography was exciting with lots of noise and smoke!! He enjoyed card games and regularly attended local village 'Whist Drives' with Mum. Throughout his life we shared his love of the 'great outdoors'.

Meanwhile, with the arrival of my 5<sup>th</sup> birthday in September 1929, I was escorted by Mum to Primary School - Commercial School - where I was greeted by the headmistress, Miss Gray, and teacher Miss Duncan! Also there were Mrs Kennedy and her youngest son Donald who shared a school career with me but, alas, perished in action in 1944, a member of Bomber Command. Strangely, in 1945, I flew with his older brother, 'Jock, a pilot, as instructor to his flight engineer!!'

While Dad no longer played the pipes - his 'favourite pastime' he once wrote - his strong interest remained. In 1933, he piled us three small children, mother and himself into the tiny Baby Austin, together with luggage and drove many a mile to the north end of the Isle of Skye to attend the unveiling of the cairn to commemorate the great piping family of Macrimmon at Boreraig. At the ferry, our little car was hoisted by crane on to the little ferry boat!

In Dunfermline, the annual school gala days were great events held on the last Friday in June. Mum was kept busy - preparing appropriate festive clothes for us all: each child had to provide a drinking mug ('tinnie') with name inscribed thereon which was taken to school before the great day and these were tied together, class by class. On the day, all the schools in the district assembled, class by class, in the Public Park and, at the appointed hour, proceeded in procession down the High Street waving flags and streamers accompanied by innumerable silver bands, brass bands, pipe bands. Crowds lined the pavements as we proceeded to Pittencreeff Park ('the Glen') where each class had its allotted play space. Each space held the appropriate bundle of 'tinnies' plus individual bags of picnic goodies and we ran races and played games through the afternoon. Seldom did it rain on that day!!



Left: Visiting John o' Groats with Auntie Maggie



Right: Snow fun in the garden at 72, Townhill

Road

Family sail to Ailsa Craig and cousin Hamish.



with Grannie (Ma) Gray

Spain

from Ailsa Craig  
Ailsa



In September 3, 1931, during a match between Celtic and Rangers at Ibrox, the Rangers centre-forward, Sam English collided accidentally with the Celtic goalkeeper, John Thomson who was mortally injured. He was renowned as one of world's finest goalkeepers. His funeral took place at Bowhill, in Fife, and as that fell within Dad's remit, he covered the occasion for his newspaper and took the family with him. At the cemetery, we joined the queue of over 30,000 mourners, some having walked 50 miles overnight from Glasgow to worship their hero.

*... cannot - "All quiet on the W. front!"*

There were many other visits, for example to Inverkeithing to see where the German warships of World War 1 were being broken up. They had been scuttled at the end of the war in Scapa Flow and were now being towed down to the breakers yard. There was also the opening of the new Kincardine Swing Bridge in October 1936. At the time, it was the largest of its type in the world and succeeded Stirling as the lowest crossing of the Firth of Forth. Dad took us to watch the exciting and noisy Hill climbs at Culross and at the Rest and be Thankful where sports cars were tested in steep muddy competition.

\*

1933 brought an upheaval for the family. Mum was confined to hospital for serious surgery and Margaret and I were despatched to the care of Auntie Maggie and Uncle Will at their croft at Balvraid, near Dornoch. We were there for many months and attended the small two-teacher school nearby. In February 1934, I remember writing the date 1.2.34! Eleanor, aged five, was looked after by Gandma (Ma) Gray and Auntie Ellie at Millerston, Glasgow.

\*

Another era opened later in 1934. We moved to the village of Crossford on the western outskirts of Dunfermline - to a newly-built bungalow on a new street, eventually named Kirkwood Crescent, parallel to the Main Street. We gave it a name - 'Altnagar'!

*The house we named.*



*Souvenir  
of five  
Mahogany  
Saber cells*

X

lives / Behind it, to the north, was a strip of tall beech trees which was to become a great childrens' playground. Dad was at once in his element converting the south-facing 'field' in front of the house into a very productive garden. He became an expert on the cultivation of roses, berries and apples - the names 'James Grieve', 'Ellison's Orange' 'Bramley's Seedling' come to mind. He developed his new hobby - beekeeping - eventually becoming Secretary of the Dunfermline and District Beekeepers Society during the war years. ^

Ref to hives. traps & ? Sources & nectar / He converted the space within the eaves of the house into a dark-room for his photography and a 'honey-producing factory'. In the lounge, a trap door in the floor gave access to what became a storage area for the many varieties of apple which he grew. He and Mum quickly got involved in village activities. They enjoyed whist drives and entered the local flower shows, exhibiting baking, jam-making, needlework, flowers, fruit, honey. He gained a 'Highly Commended' for his honey exhibit at a show in the then 'Crystal Palace' in London. We attended and participated in the village concerts.

their parents / Of course, we children were enrolled into the Crossford and Cairneyhill Primary School which was situated between the two villages - about a mile away involving usually a healthy walk morning and afternoon with our new friends. As more new houses were built and occupied, new chums arrived for us children - Dorothy and Bobby Peattie, Enid and Eleanor Gibb - and became good neighbours for Mum and Dad. I was joint dux in 1935/36 before starting secondary school in Dunfermline High school. Dad, as the local reporter, took our photo - Willie Adie and me - seated on a roadside verge near Cairneyhill. He didn't realise I was sitting on a thorn!



Dad's photo prepared for the newspaper

This half dozen hives lay in the shelter of the trees but the walk from the house up to the hives was an arduous one, the frame of woods being rather heavy. A Dad fell on one occasion left him with a slight limp.



Alas, at this time Herr Hitler was rampaging about in Europe and our government was torn between appeasement and preparation for war. On September 1, 1939, we gathered round our 'wireless' to hear Mr Neville Chamberlain, our Prime Minister, inform us that, after protracted negotiations, we had no option but to declare war on Germany. Fearing an onset of a 'blitzkrieg' such as had befallen France, Belgium and Holland, schools closed. Signs of defensive preparations sprang up. Barrage balloons appeared in the sky protecting the naval dockyard at Rosyth, occasionally falling blazing to earth struck by lightning during a thunderstorm. An anti-aircraft battery was established just south of our village and the quaint-looking Lysander aircraft regularly tested its preparedness. Dad, with other old soldiers, joined the LDV ('Local Defence Volunteers') - later 'Home Guard'. I joined the 792 Squadron, Air Training Corps which had been formed at Dunfermline High School, and later, Margaret joined the equivalent Girls' organisation. We were all issued with Identity Cards. On the flat fields near Kincardine, telegraph poles were set up to deter anticipated glider landings by enemy troops. Military aircraft traffic between Fleet Air Arm airfields at Machrihanish in the west and Donibristle in the east increased, much to my delight. I became skilled in recognising many types of aircraft. One afternoon in early 1943, I heard an unusual noise coming from the south when a 'vic' of three of the new Lancaster bombers roared low over the tree tops. It could only have been the famous 617 'Dambuster' Squadron aircraft rehearsing for the famous raid on the German dams later in May of that year.

In his capacity as the newspaper reporter covering the West Fife area, Dad had ready access to local places and events and he often took the family with him as he pursued his business.

Just before the war started, Royal Navy warships of the Fleet were anchored in the Firth of Forth near Rosyth and Dad was able to arrange a trip out to see them. The family boarded the old aircraft carrier, HMS Courageous. She was one of the first ships to be sunk by enemy submarine a few days after the outbreak of war in early September.

At home, preparations were made in case we were to suffer air raids and Dad and I started to excavate part of our garden to accommodate an air raid shelter. However, our next-door neighbours (Mr and Mrs Lowe) invited us to share the one that they had created under their house so our excavation had now to be filled in! Mum busied herself making blackout curtains. We children criss-crossed our window panes with sticky tape to prevent glass shattering in the event of bombing attacks. Buckets were filled with sand and stirrup pumps prepared in case of fire attacks.

Since no attacks had been made on our mainland, it was deemed safe to return to normal on October 16 and schools reopened. On that day, I was walking the two miles or so home from school to Crossford with a pal when there were strange sounds in the sky which turned out to be the sounds of German aircraft attacking ships of the Fleet anchored in the Firth of Forth beside the Forth Bridge - the first air attack on the mainland of Britain. Dad was immediately busy interviewing witnesses in nearby villages in order to provide his 'write-up' of the event for 'The Peoples' Journal'. There were to be many air raid warnings over the next few years and a number of enemy bombs fell close to the village.

On the nights of April 13 and 14, 1941, we listened to waves of hundreds of German bombers overhead making for Clydebank to destroy its industry - and virtually the whole town. Indeed, on the day of my Higher Science examination in February 1941, the air raid warning siren sounded as I was about to leave for Dunfermline High School on my cycle but it was cancelled within the hour.

The early days of the war had brought much gloom and, as Dad was an old soldier, we were kept well informed of what was happening. We were cheered in December 1939 by the news that the dangerous German 'pocket battleship 'Graf Spee' which had been sinking our merchant ships in the South Atlantic had been intercepted by three of our cruisers and chased into the harbour of Montevideo and forced to scuttle - our first victory!

Many Polish troops appeared in the area and our teachers were employed in holding classes in English for them. In 1942, a large contingent of Canadian troops <sup>in the</sup> were encamped north of Dunfermline. Dad took us to visit them and we did some shopping for them in town. Mother was particularly interested since some of her family had emigrated <sup>to</sup> there. Sadly, I suspect, many of these soldiers died at Dieppe soon after when a totally disastrous military attack comprising mainly Canadian troops, was staged on the French coast there on 19<sup>th</sup> August.

\*

Dad was very supportive of his mother and sister Eleanor in their home at 14, Station Road, Millerston, Glasgow and we paid them regular visits by car entailing quite long journeys since, in those days, the only bridge over the river Forth was at Stirling. We children occasionally stayed with them on short holidays. Situated at the tram car terminus, there was always something of interest. Nearby was Hogganfield Loch and its interesting wild life. Dad had been closely involved in a court case since Auntie Ellie was in dispute with the Ministry of Labour over an accident which she had had at work. It had resulted in severe damage to her right arm which remained strapped for the rest of her life.

His father, William, had, for some reason in the distant past, certainly before 1921, disappeared from the family scene but I have long suspected that Dad kept in touch with him quietly until his death in May, 1931.

Meanwhile, I had completed my 6<sup>th</sup> Year at Dunfermline High School and was considering future employment. I had fancied a career in the area of architecture or surveying but my first interview proved unsuccessful. The vacancy went to a school friend, David Aitken. Dad got me a position in the engineering department of the Fife Coal Board based in Cowdenbeath but a day in dungarees filing a small piece of metal did not attract me. Experience of delivering Christmas mail got me into the Post Office sorting office and I also joined the Royal Observer Corps <sup>where</sup> based <sup>in the</sup> in the control room <sup>at the</sup> based in one of Dunfermline's old linen mills where we plotted the multitude of aircraft movements over Central Scotland in which many training airfields had sprung up. We also kept an eye on enemy aircraft operating over the North Sea.



It was in the midst of this activity that Dad suffered a severe blow in the death of his mother- 'Ma' to us youngsters - in 1941. That morning, Mum led me to his bedroom to commiserate with him.



March 1943 arrived. I was now 18½ and eligible for National Service. I had opted for aircrew service as a Flight Engineer in the RAF. This family photograph was taken a few days before I left from Waverley Station, Edinburgh for the Aircrew Recruiting Centre in London accompanied by cousin Hamish McDougall who was already in the RAF and happened to be returning to his unit from leave.



After initial training there I was posted to Initial Training Wing in Bridlington where experience in the Air Training Corps stood me in good stead. Technical training took place at St Athan in South Wales where, in December 1943, I received my Flight Engineer's brevet and Sergeant's stripes. A few weeks followed at Aircrew Commando School at Scampton in Lincolnshire. It was from here that the famous 617 Squadron set off on the famous attack on German dams. Before arriving at Wigsley Operational Training Unit, in January 1944, I had a few days leave so I arrived home resplendent in uniform adorned with flying badges.

I returned to my Unit where I joined a six man crew as their flight engineer to start flying training as flight engineer and 'emergency' pilot, first on Stirlings and latterly on Lancasters. Now ready for operations, I joined 106 Squadron in April, 1944 at Metheringham, near Lincoln, a few nights after it had suffered the severe loss of five aircraft in one of which, the flight engineer, Norman Jackson, had been awarded the Victoria Cross for an extraordinary feat of bravery.



My crew:

Back Row: Eric Stead, mid-upper gunner; Bill Markey (RCAF), Bomb Aimer; Wally Greenwood, Rear Gunner.

Front row: Me, Flight Engineer; Ted Carmichael (RCAF), navigator; Peter Browne, Pilot and captain.

Charlie Taw, W. Op.  
A

\*

At home sisters Margaret and Eleanor knitted comforts for the troops and Mum helped in the Toc H (the international Forces charity founded in 1915 during the first World War by the Rev. Tubby Clayton) in Dunfermline serving teas and coffees and raising money for the troops. They engaged in the village money raising efforts of the day - 'Wings for Victory', 'Dig for Victory', etc. Margaret and Eleanor were also embarking on their training for their respective careers, Margaret in teaching and Eleanor in music. Dad's job had changed slightly: he was now a Special Article writer for the 'Peoples' Journal'.

\*

At home, however, it was now to be an anxious time for the family but we kept in touch through almost daily correspondence.

I did manage a short leave in July and Dad took a number of photographs of me. Truly, I did not expect to be home again. Dad, the old soldier, apparently felt the same. Extracts from his letter to Eleanor on August 13, 1944, give some indication of the relief when I completed my tour of 34 operations against the enemy.

*"I'll start off with the thrilling news that Gilbert is HOME. He arrived when your Mum and I were having a cuppie in the scullery y'day a little after 9 a.m. I just caught a glimpse of his head above the dyke. For a moment he seemed to disappear.*





*I couldn't see him for the roses. Was I wrong? What happened was that he had stopped to "have a word" with the cat! Only when he came in the gate were we relieved. Never was a face more welcome. We hadn't heard from him since Thurs. when he told us by phone that he still had one Op to do. I got through to Meth. on Saty evening but there was such a dud of a fellow at the other end that after wasting 6 mins. I wasn't a bit further forward. It seems that Gilbert actually finished the job on Friday at Bordeaux. They had been on the job from about 9 a.m. till 9 p.m., tried to get a call through on Friday evening but found there were 2 hours' delay, so failed. He was off early on Sat. and there were such queues all the way, even at Waverley, that he couldn't get a phone to tell us he was on the way. Buses here were so unapproachable that he just walked home.*

*However, all is well, and he has done a capital job. He's fair washed out though and he needs a good rest. Still he got up this morning about 7 and accompanied me to the Sma' Glen with two more hives - 2 that weren't ready last week.'..... I'm sure you and Margaret will enjoy your hols all the more now that you know that "Gibbet" is back.....Your Mum and I were delighted to get your letter today. We were worrying a good deal about Gib at the time and your envelope helped to brighten things. If Gib hadn't come last night I think your Mum would have been crazy! I was beginning to fear things myself, in fact, though I didn't say anything. I must be awful for people who get no news or bad news."*

\*

### Gallantry Runs In Their Blood

**G**ALLANTRY runs in the blood of the Swinleys, of Leven.

Father, Archie, ex-sergeant major, well-known Territorial and veteran of the Great War and the last one, holds the Military Medal and bar.

Son, Charles, has just been awarded the D.F.M.

Charles, R.A.F., a sergeant when he won the honour, is now a flying officer. Citation states that in May 1944 the aircraft in which he was flight engineer was returning from attacking Nantes when it was badly damaged by an enemy fighter. Following an emergency landing it caught fire. Sergeant Swinley fought the flames and saved the aircraft from destruction. On another occasion he displayed great coolness and skill when his aircraft was heavily damaged.

F.O. Swinley was only 15 when he joined up. After being shot down over France he was hidden by French patriots and remained with them till liberated by the Americans several months later.

He is married to an East Wemyss lady, formerly Miss Ann M'Beth, Alexander Street.

F.O. Swinley's home is at Culzean, Anderson Street, Leven. His father was at Dunkirk, and was only demobilised in June 44.

A few weeks later, Dad was called to interview a young airman in Leven who had just been awarded the Distinguished Flying Medal. Little did he know that Charles Swinley had been a comrade of mine on 106 Squadron at Metheringham. Earlier, in July 1944, I had returned from leave to find that the crew with whom my crew shared a Nissen Hut billet had disappeared - shot down on an attack on an important flying bomb base near Paris. 'Chick' Swinley was the Flight Engineer of that crew. As was later revealed, all seven crew members escaped with their lives, two being captured by the Germans, the other five, including Swinley, sheltered by friendly French. For his efforts to save his stricken Lancaster he was awarded the DFM.

In the year 2017, the widow of the rear gunner of that crew, a Mrs Marion Sheridan in Canada, sent me a little book entitled 'Did You Say' Bale Out' Skipper'. It details the experiences of all seven of the crew after they survived the crash - quite a story!

\*

Although I had never heard him play the pipes, his keen interest still remained. A newspaper cutting of August 1944 reports that he had been judging the piping competition at Alloa Town Council's stay-at-home holiday sports.

\*

It was the time of year when the heather was coming into full bloom and beekeepers sought to take advantage by moving their hives to the moors. The Sma' Glen near Crieff was a favourite spot for the beekeepers of West Fife.



Left: Some of dad's beekeeper friends loaded up and ready to go!

Dad, being Secretary of the Dunfermline and Rosyth Beekeepers' Association, kept close touch with the College of Agriculture in Edinburgh.

Here he is (right) with a fellow-beekeeper colleague (Mr Dungavel) en route to Edinburgh on the Queensferry crossing.



Left: Dad, third from left, at a display of 'shallow frames'. Mr Rodger, lecturer, on his right, (c 1935) was a frequent visitor to the house'

On October, 1944, at a local flower and vegetable show, he was awarded First prize for 'One Shallow heather honey' and 2<sup>nd</sup> prize for 'Two 1 lb jars of heather honey '.

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It appears from his letters at this time that Dad was finding a desire to change his job. In June, he writes that he is contemplating visiting Campbeltown with a view to discussing taking over the local newspaper. I responded that *'it would be a pity that we would have to leave our Dunfermline friends but that can't be helped'*. However, within the month he had switched his interest to Crieff!!..... and later to Nairn!!

*Amis*

*Sp*

Mum and my sisters were in the news. Mum had had been busy helping during 'Soldier Week' and had got her picture in the newspaper. They had also arranged their own money-raising events in the back garden. The girls were achieving some success at school and Margaret, now finished at Dunfermline High, had got a job at Fairley's in Cairneyhill. Indeed, Dad remarked that *'Grays were prominent in the Dunfermline High School distinction and merit lists'*. They were now on summer holiday at Balvraid.

Much of the content of Dad's letters related to his garden - how the rasps were ripening - how he feared he had made a mistake in the way he had pruned his fruit trees - how colourful his roses were - how well the chickens were laying - how his tomatoes in the greenhouse he had built were coming on well. His work among his bees was one of his main concerns. They required a lot of attention and handling them was heavy work. A quietly spoken and sentimental and emotional man, he was much distressed at the deaths of some of his old cronies

As an old soldier himself, he had much to write about regarding the progress of our armies abroad and I had kept him fully informed about my own flying activities. I was now, of course, engaged in instructional duties among new crews preparing to go on operations in the bomber squadrons.

But ..... on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August 1945, with the final surrender of the Japanese, the war came to an end.



Throughout the country there was naturally much rejoicing and celebration of 'VJ Day' - displays of patriotic colours - bunting, flags, parades, street parties.

The Gray household at 'Altnagar', Kirkwood Crescent in the village of Crossford was no exception. A village celebration had taken place but, in a letter home, I mourned the fact that a 20-mile travel ban had been placed on the personnel at my unit!!

However, my letters home were far from cheerful. Although I was now Warrant Officer, aircrew were declared redundant and during the next three months my letters told of movement from one RAF station to another - Burn, Catterick, Kirkham - as the RAF sought to train me for another job. After a two-month course I qualified as Clerk Equipment Accounts. My new destination ? I had to inform the family eventually that it would be somewhere out east!!

I boarded a stripped down Liberator at Oakington in East Anglia on December 8 and within a few hours was landing in a thunderstorm at Castel Benito in Tunisia. Then it was on to Cairo West in Egypt. Engine trouble delayed our departure for a week before pressing on to Shaibah in Iraq whence, after a short break, we set off for Mauripur in north-east India. It was now December 15. At each stop, I had dashed off a letter home giving details of the journey and landscapes so far. A week later a twin-engined Dakota flew a few of us, via Poona to Arkonam. A lorry trip to Avadi completed the trip to 337 Maintenance Unit- a huge military assemblage of Army, Navy and Air Force Units near Madras, now Chennai. This was to be my 'residence' for the next eleven months. I had, meantime, continued to keep family informed of my travel and, just as important, I was now able to provide family with an address to allow them to communicate with me. There now commenced a regular flow of letters which, from my end, totalled over eighty during the next ten months. Of course, a corresponding number came from home so the postal service was kept busy!

Now I was faced with a new currency - rupees. I got my allocation home sorted out - the equivalent of 3/- per day which I had established a year earlier. I was soon in touch with Dad as I considered my future beyond the RAF. I sought his opinion on a General Draughtsmanship Course which attracted me and, in time, received a set of professional instruments to allow me to follow a correspondence course. He also accepted my suggestion that, since I was a non-smoker, I would send him my regular ration of cigarettes though he would have preferred cigars! About this time, his leg was giving him trouble, so much so that he had to visit Edinburgh infirmary for X-ray.

As a family in Dunfermline, and later in Crossford, my parents were members of Canmore Congregational Church and we children attended its large Sunday School. Over the years we became immersed in its affairs and organisations. In February, 1946, Dad had been appointed a Deacon and soon after was asked to arrange a 'Welcome Home' function for the first of the returning ex-servicemen and women. Others followed. Later, with his experience in journalism, he was appointed Editor of the Church News Letter - a post he held for several years.

At home, Eleanor had decided to take up a career in music and in July had passed her music exam and had five pupils. Margaret was doing well at Moray House Teacher Training College and, in June now aged 20, got an appointment in September at a school not too far from home. Dad had decided to sell some of his bee stocks but nevertheless was busy with the remainder in July.



My letters were full of descriptions from my visits into Madras and the surrounding area, sporting prowess at football, cricket and swimming and descriptions of my two spells of leave in the Nilgiri Hills, but at the end of July, Dad informed me that the newspapers were publicising the new Forces' Pay Code produced by the Labour Government and which had improved their pay and conditions. Alas, my experience was quite different since I had been reduced in rank from Warrant Officer to Sergeant and certain elements of my pay had disappeared - a real humiliation!

However, in November I was able to tell the folks at home that I was on my way home. 'Don't send any more letters!' I busied myself in assembling parcels to send home - floor mats, dress lengths, nylon stockings, tinned fruits, cigarettes, sweets, decorative embroidery.... lots of things that were not available in British postwar austerity. After the long train journey to Bombay, I boarded the liner 'Britannic' and sailed home via the Red Sea, Suez Canal, Mediterranean Sea, Bay of Biscay, Irish Sea to disembark on a dank, misty morning at Liverpool.

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I was eventually demobilised in April 1947 and rejoined the family circle at a time when Ice Hockey had become established in Scotland - in Dunfermline, Kirkcaldy, Perth, Ayr and Dundee. Dad, of course, reported on the matches and became 'hooked'. The enthusiasm spread to the family so we regularly attended the Dunfermline Ice Rink to support Dunfermline Vikings in their exciting and boisterous matches. The players were mainly young Canadians and on one occasion, two of the players were invited to our house at Crossford for tea, much to the excitement of Margaret and Eleanor - and mother! On another memorable trip, Dad took us to the far north-west of Sutherland to view the spectacular scenic delights of what is now designated a 'Geological Park'.

However, other matters were afoot. Dad was still trying to acquire a newspaper business. Now aged 58, it seemed a rather ambitious project but in the following year he acquired the 'Kinross-shire Advertiser'. A farewell letter of January 29, 1948 from Mr G G Glass of the 'People's Journal' wished him well. *'I would like to thank you for all you have done to help me in recent years. I also appreciate what you have done to introduce Mr Young to the West Fife district.....Have you now got rid of the ailment which kept you to the house for some time? I hope so, and that there will no recurrence while you are engaged in your Kinross work'.*

Dad had always seemed to be in robust health and very active with his bees and in the garden though he did have a nasty and painful bout of erysipelas which confined him to bed on one occasion.

Now he had no motor car having forfeited his company car and had to depend for a time on daily bus travel from Crossford to Kinross and to Alloa where the paper was printed. The next six years became increasingly burdensome.

Dad's career had been in journalism but his new business included tenure of a shop in Kinross, management of which demanded new skills of which he had little working experience. Sometimes he had to depend on family to cover for him. Eleanor was called upon from time to time to look after the shop in his absence on other duties. On one occasion I covered the events of the Glenfarg Highland Games for him!

Retiral was now in his mind! He was keen to settle in Dornoch and reconnoitered the area. Mother was not so keen. In April, 1954, I joined the family on an inspection of a large stone-built property there which Dad had admired. Mum and Eleanor, both adept at cooking and baking eventually saw the possibilities of the place as a Guest house.

The sale of 'Altnagar' in Crossford proved difficult and disappointing since further new houses were being built in the village but Dad was advised by Lawyers Malcolm, Jack & Matheson on September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1954 to accept the offer which had been received.

On October 18, 1954, Mum and Dad with Eleanor took up residence in the house in Dornoch which they christened 'Benoran' - 'Hill of Song'! Margaret, in her teaching post, remained in Dunfermline until such time as a teaching vacancy appeared in the area. It did eventually - in Helmsdale!!

Within a month, disaster struck. Dad had a stroke! He suffered a degree of impairment, including his speech, but before long he was throwing himself into activity - within the house in preparation for the receipt of guests - developing the garden for fruit and vegetables. He was often in the garden before 6 am. He retrieved his beehives from Crossford with the assistance of a former Dunfermline resident now settled in the area - Jack Duncan. Dad mourned his death from cancer five years later. He revelled in meeting old friends and making new ones. He was recovered enough to disappear in the car to explore the surrounding district. He was roped in to judge the piping classes at the Dornoch Games on one occason. No doubt he often reminisced about his army days when stationed in Dornoch in 1915.

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Meantime, I had graduated and taken up my first teaching post in June 1951 at King's Road Junior secondary School, Rosyth and in July 1953, I married Daphne and left the family home to reside in Dunfermline where Caroline was born in December 1954. We took her north to meet her grandparents.



Left: Benoran 1955 - Baby Caroline spoiled by new grandparents Mum and Dad, Aunts Eleanor and Margaret. Mother Daphne in background!



Easter 1955 saw me appointed to a new post in Aberdeen Academy and we moved into a little new house in Bridge of Don - in Donmouth Gardens - overlooking the mouth of the river Don. Mum and Dad visited us there in 1957.



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In Dornoch, the attractions of Dornoch and particularly of new Guest-House 'Benoran' were being publicly advertised in early 1955 and the first guests soon arrived. The venture continued until 1968. Over the next number of years, the family were visited by many relations and old friends from Dunfermline and elsewhere. It was a busy and happy time and Dad was at his liveliest best among new acquaintances.

Margaret eventually got a teaching post in Dornoch Academy in 1957 and later became Infant Mistress in the school while Eleanor was appointed Music Instructor there and was much involved in musical activity within the district including organist in the Cathedral. Thus the family was now more firmly settled.

In the summer of 1958, I conducted a study tour of part of Sutherland for some thirty of my senior geography pupils in Aberdeen Academy and, of course, Dornoch was included. After inspecting the seashore and Cathedral and surroundings, we all arrived at 'Benoran' and partook of the family's fresh home baking!

\*

On December 22, 1958, Alistair was born soon after I had been appointed Principal Teacher of Geography in Lanark Grammar School and we were about to leave Aberdeen.

On January 9, 1959 Dad wrote me a letter wishing me well. Its contents and style seem to sum up his writing style, genial character, talent and wide interests. I am constrained to print part of it here.

*Dear Gib,*

*To greet you in your new post down in Lanark, the garden of the Clyde Valley. I said to your Mum, when she was in Aberdeen, that what was Invss, Huntly and Inverurie's loss would be Lanark's gain. And I am sure it will be that way.*

*I'm glad you have the First post for that will suit you in further advance. As far as your new surroundings are concerned it would suit me down to the ground - fine for gardens and fruit. In a way I'm sorry you have left Abdnshire for I always had a soft side to it and Kincardineshire. But you must go where there is scope and Abdnshire lost their chance to keep a good man!*

*Are you having the snow that we have had today? It is our first. About three inches, but it won't lie. (That is the action of the sea breezes, you see!). Out in the country, however, away up in yon country where you were with your scholars it is a different matter. I've been gathering the seaweed for the garden recently for the garden. It's good. No charge! There's been a high tide of late and the driftwood (I can't get the proper name for the matter left by the tide) (Flotsam and Jetsum!) It's specially good for the garden ground for it has not had any manure - just sand.*



*That's a bad thing about those Glasgow youths who set out to walk from Braemar to the Lairig Grue. Like many more they never knew what the weather is like. It seems they were off before a BBC weather bulletin was out warning of a blizzard in the offing. But perhaps it would have meant nothing to them.*

*Our New Year is practically over. We are having the Clashmore folks, including Auntie Lizzie, in today. Bob and "Doodie" were in last Fri, and we returned the visit on Sunday. That's the last.*

*Well, I trust you will like your new situation and that you will soon get un maison avec, peut-être, un jardin grande!! Or a jardin banne!! Margt got home last night and we are all well. Ta ralao.*

*Wishing you well,*

*Dad.*

•

Dad was anxious to extend his gardening by having a greenhouse and by late 1959 had decided on its location and was making his final calculations and requirements. He placed his order in early January and on the 6<sup>th</sup> he went out into the garden, no doubt to make sure that all was ready for the receipt of his greenhouse. Mum became anxious when he seemed to be taking rather a long time. Margaret investigated and found him lying inert. He had had a seizure of some kind and had passed away. He had had his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday on the previous November 6<sup>th</sup>. The long retirement which he would have anticipated had been denied him.



A few days later, he left 'Benoran' for the last time and was escorted to the cemetery by many friends and I laid him to rest beside Mum's ancestors. Assisting me were John Forsyth, brother-in-law, Northie Gray, cousin, Hamish MacDougall, nephew, old friend Danny Murray, Bardachan, Captain R Grant, Hugh Steele, and piper Hugh Grant, Migdale.

'The Northern Times', on Friday, January 15, 1960 carried a lengthy obituary. Its final words were - 'Courteous and balanced in his outlook, he was a fine citizen and a most likeable personality.'

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Now, widowed at the age of 68, and still very active physically and mentally, Mum kept the household going and remained in touch with community affairs and activities. She enjoyed and admired the talents of her daughters and shared a number of short holidays with them. As a good cook, she enjoyed baking her griddle scones, pancakes and oatcakes. She relished the company of the many visitors who popped in over the years, especially those from afar - nieces from USA, former neighbours and friends from Fife. Mum never lost her Sutherland accent nor her quick sense of humour - always ready for a good laugh. As her faculties declined she depended more on the care of Margaret and Eleanor who drove her on short pleasure trips and occasionally further afield to Tain or Inverness on shopping expeditions.