



DORNOCH
HERITAGE SOCIETY

Talk
Dornoch, WW1 and Me

By
Mike Hook



Council Chamber (Carnegie Buildings)
October 16th 7.30pm
Open to all.....£1 entry to non-members.

'WW1 and Me'
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16th October 2014

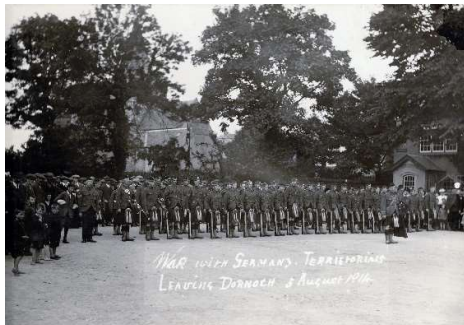
Historylinks Archive Catalogue No. 2015_005

I've entitled this talk, Dornoch, 'World War I and Me' not because I personally took part in that particular conflict, although some of my pupils might believe that I did so, but simply because if World War I had not taken place, then I would not be here today. I will elaborate on this rather dramatic statement a little later, because I want to begin by looking at the impact the war had on the community of Dornoch between 1914 and 1918.

This can't be a definitive or wholly comprehensive account of how the war affected the town. That would take far too long, and Peter Wild told me that I should limit myself to about 45 minutes at the very most here. Moreover, I've at large based my account on the minutes of Dornoch Town Council during the war, which tends to limit the scope of the talk.

The first reference to the outbreak of World War I in the Council Minutes is a rather brief, yet poignant note in red pen, written in the margin of the minutes for the 4th of August 1914, by the Town Clerk, Hector Mackay. It simply notes, Dornoch, 4th August 1914. British and German empires in a state of war, as from 11.45 p.m. today.

With this simple matter-of-fact statement, Dornoch's involvement in World War I began. Tragically, no one living in Dornoch at the time could possibly have imagined the impact the war would have on this remote Highland community.



The following day, there was another brief note in the Council Minutes to the effect that a Territorial Company left at 11.30 a.m. for Bedford for training. The Dornoch company of the Territorial Army was initially sent to Galsby after the mobilisation. These were not regular soldiers, but young local men who had volunteered for home defence in the time of war. It would be true to say that none of these part-time soldiers had any concept of what was about to happen to them. Most would have looked upon events in those early days of the war as some sort of adventure. None were prepared for the horrors to come.

Caption reads: War with Germany Territorials Leaving Dornoch 4 August 1914
Historylinks Archive Cat No. 2009_040_05

Now, among those who joined up on 5 August 1914 were Private William Sutherland, Lieutenant William Alexander MacDonald, and Private James Mackay. If possible, I would like you to try and remember these names, as I will be returning to them a little bit later - that's the teacher in me.

The Dornoch volunteers, together with those from the other small communities throughout the southeast of Sutherland, were part of the Seaforth and Cameron Brigade of the famous 51st Highland Division, composed of the 4th Ross-shire, the 5th Sutherland and Caithness, and 6th Morayshire Battalions of the Seaforth Highlanders. After 10 days of basic training at Galsby, the Dornoch boys were sent by train to Bedford, the County Town of Bedfordshire in southeast England. Why there? Well, pre-war strategic planning had identified that any future attempted invasion of Britain would probably take place on the southern or eastern coasts of England and Bedford, with its central location and excellent transport infrastructure, was ideally placed for troop concentration.

I'm very grateful for an article written by a guy called Patrick Watt, published in History Scotland in 2013, for much of what follows. For many of the young men who travelled south in the early days of World War I, this would have been the first time they had left Sutherland, never mind Scotland. The journey into England created some misunderstanding among their hosts. A number of Ross-shire were native Gaelic speakers, and when they informed their hosts in Bedford that they came from somewhere called Ross-shire, rumours began that these strange non-English speakers were Russians en route from Archangel to fight with their British and French allies in the Western Front!

20,000 men of the Highland Division arrived in Bedford on the 16th of August, which increased the population of the town by somewhere between 30 and 50%. Apparently, however, the good citizens of Bedford welcomed the Highlanders. The Inverness Courier of the 13th of October reported that the population of the town threw open their gates and gave them a real hearty English welcome. The warmth of that welcome may have been partly due to the fact that those inhabitants of Bedford who billeted Highlanders in their houses were given nine pence per soldier or three shillings per officer per day. A nice little financial inducement there for them. However, the Highlanders also had to deal with stereotypical English views of their lifestyles. Gentlemen from Bedford speaking at the meeting held in the town just before the Highlanders' arrival urged locals to be gentle to the Highlanders because he had come across a Highland man who had never in his life been in a train.

However, locals and Highlanders generally got on well with one another as the many anecdotes of the good relations between the two populations readily confirmed. The Highlanders' training for war was hampered by a lack of facilities in the area. This was rectified, however, when the division set about building rifle ranges and practice trenches in open ground around the town, which must have acted as an effective deterrent to local dog walkers, I would have thought. However, in November 1914, the division suffered its first casualties of the war. The 51st was struck by measles, which caused chaos in the ranks of the soldiers. Now, I can't be sure if any of the lads from Dornoch or the surrounding areas died, but including those sick men who were evacuated to Scotland, over 130 men did die from the disease.

These troops from the Highlands suffered a disproportionate number of deaths compared to the recruits from other parts of Scotland, probably as a consequence of never having previously been exposed to the disease in their remote crofts and glens. The Bedfordshire Times reported that the 4th Camerons suffered 141 cases of measles and 14 deaths out of the total battalion strength of 930 men. It was hardly an auspicious beginning.

Now, early November also saw the breaking up of the division as the first detachments left for active service in France. Further units left in February and were replaced at Bedford by battalions from Scotland and from parts of England. Indeed, by the time that the Highland Division left Bedford on the 29th of April 1915, one entire brigade was composed of English soldiers. More importantly, so far as we are concerned, the 5th Seaforths were among those who departed at the time, arriving in France in early May 1915. The men of the division were genuinely sorry to leave Bedford. As Captain Donald Ross of the 7th Gordon Highlanders wrote at the time, *'our goodbyes were parched in our lips, for Bedford had mothered us and we had grown up as our own children'*.



Territorials leaving Bedford for France
Historylinks Archive Cat No. 2009_040_02

Now, it's not my intention to go on and describe the role played by the 5th Seaforths in World War I, save to note, obviously, that it was an honourable role. Most of what follows will focus on the life in Dornoch and how the war impacted on the town.

One of the earliest indications that Dornoch's geographical isolation was to prove no barrier to requests and instructions from the government came on 11th of August 1914 in the form of a telegram from His Royal Highness, Prince of Wales, to Dornoch Town Council. The telegram stated: *'I earnestly trust that you will assist my National Relief Fund by opening a subscription list without delay, forwarding results to Buckingham Palace. Please do all that lies in your power to interest those among whom your influence extends'*, signed by Prince Edward. I think probably a similar letter went to every Town Council in Britain at that stage.

In response, the Dornoch Council agreed to form a committee for the purposes of collecting and forwarding subscriptions and dealing with local cases of distress. All members of the committee, including the Provost, Office Bearers, and Council, Sheriff Campbell, and Churchmen, were to act as collectors. And the first meeting of the National Relief Committee was held on 2nd of November 1914, where it was noted that the fund had reached £266.16s.6d. It was proposed that a list of subscribers be published in the Northern Times, but this was rejected on the grounds that the paper was going to charge two pence a line for this, a sum that was described in the minutes as being excessive. Indeed, instead, it was agreed to type a list of subscribers and circulate this list as widely as possible. That might have been interesting.

A decision was also taken to amalgamate the Borough Committee for National Relief with the Parish Committee. By 8th of October, the sum collected had risen to an impressive £385. 8s.10d. Now probably like some of you sitting here, I became curious as to how much that would actually be in current money. So, I did what every good researcher did. I Googled it and came up with the fact that £385.8s.10d is worth approximately £31,000 at today's prices, which if you think about that, is a tremendous amount of money. If we had managed to raise £31,000 for something now it would be a remarkable achievement, and the population is now about four or five times what it was then.

From the outbreak of war, local and national newspapers engaged in an orgy of patriotic reporting describing the efforts being made by the good and the great to contribute to the war effort. In our part of the world, the Northern Times of 18th of August 1914 noted that George Sutherland, the Duke of Sutherland, had been appointed Honorary Colonel of the 5th Sutherland and Caithness Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders. The Duke had also made an appeal for people, presumably those of some considerable personal wealth, to lend their country houses on the east coast of the UK for the influx of sick to this country. He himself would coordinate this effort. The Duke also placed Dunrobin Castle at the disposal of the Admiralty to be used as a naval hospital and his yacht was put in standby,

ready to convey any wounded there. The Duke's fleet of motor cars was also at the disposal of the government, presumably as rather luxurious ambulances. The Duchess herself also contributed to the war effort by volunteering as a nurse in service of the Red Cross and indeed saw active duty during the war.

At the same time as the Duke of Sutherland was placing his vast resources at the disposal of the government, another even wealthier resident of southeast Sutherland was leaving the county. On the 24th of September, the Northern Times reported that Andrew Carnegie had left Liverpool for New York. When questioned by reporters, Carnegie refused to comment on the war, citing President Woodrow Wilson's strict injunction for neutrality.

Young people were also willing to contribute to the war effort, sometimes perhaps for ulterior motives. The Northern Times reported that Boy Scouts were in guard at various locations and proving their usefulness as express messengers. However, the paper reported on the 15th of October 1914, that at the last meeting of the Dornoch School Board, it was felt that the military situation was having a detrimental effect on the school and would result in a very heavy financial loss as 18 pupils were presently withdrawn. The report went on to state that the Board felt that with the exception of those who had joined up, there was no need for any of those in the Boy Scouts to absent themselves from the schools, as this was not happening in other areas. As a current teacher at Dornoch Academy, I must question the accuracy of this report. Personally, I refuse to believe that any Dornoch School pupils would ever attempt to avoid their lessons with Ms. Munro!

But the Northern Times also praised the reaction of local men to the call to arms, noting on the 3rd of September that Sutherland and Caithness have made a magnificent response to the call to arms. Territorials, Royal Navy Reserve men and National Reservists were at their posts when required. Recruiting for the territorial force has been extremely brisk, it noted. A stirring recruitment notice for the 5th Battalion Seaforth Highlanders was also published in the paper. And I quote: *"The Sutherland and Caithness Rifle Battalion still requires a number of recruits, and it is the duty of every available man to join and bring the battalion up to full strength. Already about 120 men have been sent to the battalion at Bedford for mobilization, but there is still room for about 100 more, and it is hoped that the young manhood in the recruiting areas of Sutherland and Caithness will see the necessity of coming forward and doing their duty for their country. Young men of Sutherland and Caithness, be up and at it and prove to the world the stuff you are made of"*.

In September 1914, the Dornoch branch of the Red Cross Society was also making its contribution to the war effort. Clothing and bandages were sent to the Red Cross depot at Aberdeen for distribution. The Northern Times was particularly impressed by the Fisher Girls of Embo, who deserved great credit for knitting 50 pairs of socks, which were earmarked and sent to the Royal Navy Reserve, and they also knitted 50 pairs of socks for the Territorials at Bedford. There was about 1,000 men, I think, in that battalion, so an awful lot of them didn't get socks from the Embo girls, but there you go.

In the early weeks of the war, that is before the telegrams from the front began to arrive at the homes of the parents or wives or sisters of those who had been killed, individuals engaged in a form of patriotic propaganda that involved boasting about the sacrifices made on behalf of the nation by the local communities to which they belonged. On the 24th of September 1914, Hector Mackay, Town Clerk of Dornoch, responded to a letter sent by the Town Clerk of Ely in Fife to the Scotsman newspaper. A copy of Mackay's letter was published in the Northern Times. I'll quote here. *"Sir, in answer to the Town Clerk of Ely's question in your issue of yesterday, whether any borough can beat Ely, I submit the following: we have 130 male electors resident in the borough of Dornoch, as against 119 in Ely. The borough, exclusive of the landlord part of the parish, has sent 38 to serve in the Imperial forces, as against Ely's 27, and has raised to date £349.15s.10d for the National Relief Fund, as against Ely's £287.5d. I may add that the local territorial company, to a man, volunteered not merely for Imperial service, but for the front"*.

Now, this correspondence would be laughable if it wasn't so tragic. There were remarkable similarities between the two communities. Both were seaside resorts. The two towns had similar populations. The 1911 census put Dornoch population at 741, while Ely's, was 692. And both communities were dependent on the game of golf to attract visitors to their respective towns. The two towns, however, were soon to have something else in common, something that neither Town Clerk would be quite so keen to boast about. In 1922, Dornoch unveiled its war memorial. There were 69 names on it. A year earlier Ely had done likewise. There were 34 men's names on that memorial, two of whom ironically fought and died as Seaforth Highlanders. One can only hope that neither Town Clerk derived any pleasure from these particular statistics.

Further evidence that everyday life in the borough was about to change came on the 13th of October 1914, when the Town Council received a letter from the Scottish Secretary advising the town that lighting, especially when seen from the sea, should be reduced to a minimum during the present war. In response, the Council resolved that lights in private dwellings were to be obscured and the street lamps be not lit meantime. And a few days after the war began, the Liberal government passed the 'Defence of the Realm Act', commonly known as DORA. This act placed considerable restrictions on many aspects of people's lives and enabled the government to take such measures as it deemed necessary to protect the national interest during the war. Some of these measures were understandable, such as allowing the government to take over factories to control and facilitate the production of essential wartime materials, such as ammunition, weapons, shipping, et cetera. Other restrictions appeared somewhat ridiculous when looked at today, such as not being allowed to give bread to horses or chickens or using invisible ink when writing abroad. In the case of the last point, how would anyone know?

The question of alcohol consumption also raised its frothy head. Many politicians and senior military figures believed that heavy drinking led to absenteeism in the workplace, which in turn led to a loss of production. In January 1915, Lloyd George told the Shipbuilding and Employers Federation that Britain was fighting Germans, Austrians, and drink, and as far as I can see, the greatest of these foes is drink. Lloyd George started a campaign to persuade national figures to make a pledge that they would not drink alcohol during the war. In April 1915, George V gave his support to the campaign when he promised that no alcohol would be consumed in the Royal Household until the war was over. On the 6th of April, Dornoch Town Council responded to the King's statement and resolved that, in view of the example set by His Majesty the King and the Royal Household, the danger threatening our armies in the field from a lack of munitions of war and delay in transport of the same, due to the sapping of working energy by drink, the serious statement made by those responsible for the manufacture of war material and the demand by the leaders responsible for the Navy and Army for total prohibitions during the period of the war of the sale of excisable liquors in order to meet national requirement, the Town Council respectfully petitions His Majesty's government in favour of taking immediate steps to secure total prohibition during the war.

The government did respond to this in a sense, not to Dornoch, but this idea. This is as an aside. In October 1915, the British government announced several measures they believed would reduce alcohol consumption and a 'no treating order' laid down that people could not buy alcoholic drinks for other people. That would mean if you went into the pub with your wife, you couldn't buy her a drink, which is not a bad idea in some ways, but actually they come across a number of instances of the guy being fined and the barmaid who served him being fined. So, they were quite strict about it. Public house opening times were also reduced to 12 o'clock noon to 2.30 p.m. and from 6.30 to 9.30 p.m. Before the law was changed, public houses could open from 5 in the morning till 12.30 a.m. the following day. Finally, beer was watered down in order to help reduce drunkenness. So that's the story of how it happened.

On a much more sombre note, on the same day that the Council formally responded to the King's decision to take the pledge, that is 6th of April 1915, the Borough was informed for the first time of the death and action of young men from Dornoch. The Minutes noted that the Council recorded its appreciation of and admiration for the gallantry displayed by the young men belonging to the town

who had taken part in the Battle of Neuve Chapelle, which was fought between 10th and 13th of March 1915, and also its profound and deep sorrow and sympathy with the parents and friends of the two young townsmen who have sacrificed their lives for their country's sake on that battlefield, that is Private William Murray, Gordon Highlanders, son of Walter Murray, North Street, and Private William Dingwall, Scots Guards, son of Donald Dingwall, Wales Street.

On the 7th of September 1915, the Council resolved to insure the library for £1,000 pounds and the slaughterhouse for £400 pounds against possible bombardment. This decision was undoubtedly in response to the repeated bombardment of London between May and December 1915, by German airships. Indeed, Edinburgh was bombed by airships as late as April 1917. However, just why the German high command would have thought it necessary to bomb Dornoch's library and slaughterhouse is not made clear in the minutes.

In October 1919, we have an account of the first Medal for Bravery awarded to one of the Dornoch boys. Second Lieutenant George Alexander Bentick of the 9th Battalion, Royal Scots, was awarded the Military Cross for "conspicuous gallantry". The citation continues, "when the leading battalion was held up by machine gun fire, he brought up a gun into the front line and kept it in action under heavy shell fire. Later the same day, he was instrumental in bringing-in 24 officers and men under heavy fire. Next day, he again distinguished himself and was wounded".

The Council was effusive in its praise, recording the gratification with which the whole town had learned of the courage and resources shown by Bentick in the critical moments of the attack. Incidentally, George was the son of the Reverend Charles Donald Bentick, who presided over Dornoch Cathedral from 1906 to 1936, and was the author of the book, 'Dornoch Cathedral and Parish', which was published in 1926.

One of the final entries in the Town Council Minutes for 1916 comes on the 5th of December 1916, informing the community of the death of Private Thomas McCulloch, 5th Seaforth, at Beaumont-Hamel. This battle was a stunning victory for the men of the 51st Highland Division, which included, of course, the 5th Seaforth, who captured the village on the 13th of November 1916. It was one of the final encounters of the Battle of the Somme, which as many of you must know, began in July of that year. It is also one of the many memorials visited by pupils from Dornoch Academy, of which more hopefully a bit later.

May Day, 1917, was undoubtedly the bluest day for Dornoch during the entire war. The Council noted with some sorrow the deaths of the following young men in the town. Private Walter Matheson, 5th Seaforth's, for many years faithful and courteous assistant in the Town Clerk's office, reported missing since the Battle of Beaumont-Hamel on 13th of November last, and now officially reported as being killed in action, son of George Matheson, Castle Street. Also killed in action were 2nd Lieutenant Thomas B. Waddell, 4th Seaforth's at Arras in April last, science master at the Academy in Dornoch. Also, Private Walter Mackay, 5th Seaforth's, postman and son of Mr. Robert Mackay, killed in action at Arras, and Private Hugh Sutherland, Northumberland Fusiliers, assistant grocer, son of Mr. William Sutherland, Castle Street, killed at Arras. The impact of those four deaths in such a small town as Dornoch must have been truly horrendous.

On a somewhat lighter note, between the 5th of June 1917 and the 24th of July, there was a deal of correspondence between the Council and the Bandmaster of the 2nd Seaforth's at Fort George. This centred around the proposed visit of the band to various sites in the north of Scotland to support the war fund for disabled Seaforth's. As usual, the Council formed a special committee, this time to co-operate with the band of the Seaforth's. A Thursday afternoon or evening was deemed to be the most appropriate time for the band to play, with the concert to take place in the Territorial Hall, and the committee should endeavour to, quote, '*secure the services of young ladies*', wait for it, '*for the sale of programmes and poaches*'. I did wonder when I first read that. The band eventually visited Dornoch on the 28th of July. The Station Hotel grounds had been secured for the dancing and the hotel kitchens were used to prepare teas, which were served on small tables, all of which had been organised by a committee of ladies.

The band must have enjoyed its visit because the following July, the Council discussed another proposed visit by the band, this time in aid of the regimental prisoner of war fund. This time, however, the Council rejected the proposal on grounds that it would probably be unsuccessful as the borough had just held a national prisoner of war day, a Red Cross day, and the Canadians had just celebrated Dominion Day. Presumably, the townsfolk were either too exhausted, too skint, or perhaps both, to engage in any further activities.

If the minutes of the Town Council are to be believed and given the reliance of this particular talk on the veracity of said minutes, I can only hope that this is indeed the case. One major disruptive influence that was visited on the ancient and Royal Borough during World War 1 was the arrival of the Canadian Forestry Corps, the CFC. The CFC was established in November 1916 when it was recognized that ever-increasing amounts of wood would be required in the Western Front. Duckboards, shoring timbers, crates, et cetera, anything that needed wood had to be provided. The British government concluded that there was no one more experienced or qualified in the British Empire to harvest timber than the Canadians.

At first, the idea was to harvest trees from Canada's own abundant forests and bring them overseas. But space aboard merchant ships was at a premium, largely as a result of the successful German U-boat campaign against British merchant shipping. So rather than stuff ships' holds of timber, it was decided to use the Canadian troops already stationed in Europe to cut down forests in the UK and France. A number of companies of Canadian Foresters were sent to Scotland as a result, including the 117th and 129th companies that were stationed in southeast Sutherland to harvest trees in the Duke of Sutherland's estates, including one at the Poles. The first mention of the Canadian Forestry Corps in the Minutes of this Council occurs on the 9th of November 1917, when the Council resolved to apply to the chief constable for authority to light street lamps, not exceeding one dozen, at the principal point in the town, in view of the town being now the HQ of a large number of Canadian foresters. Now, I can't be certain of just how many Canadians were stationed in or around Dornoch at this time, but each Company consisted of approximately 140 men, which would have represented a huge influx of people to the area, considering that, as I've already noted, the entire population of the borough was only 741, according to the 1911 census.

A few weeks later, on the 4th of December, the Council resolved to draw the attention of the officer commanding 117th company, Canadian Forestry Corps, to *a.* the laying down of a quantity of very rough gravel on a public roadway at the east end of Castle Street, without consultation with or authority from the Town Council, and *b.* to the tank and vehicles left at the side of the public road near the railway station, and that he be asked to remove them now, they being dangerous to the public in the present darkened state of the streets. The matter clearly wasn't resolved, as on the 5th of February 1918, the Town Clerk reported that he had informed the engineering inspector of the Roads Board to claim for damage to the borough roads caused by the Canadian Forestry Corps. Mr. Robert Grant, County Roads Surveyor, was to prepare the Borough's claim. However, before this matter could be resolved, on the 5th of March 1918, the Council Minutes recorded that attention having been drawn to the unseemly conduct on the streets in the last two Sundays of Canadian soldiers, apparently the worst for drink, it was resolved that the Chief Constable be written to on the matter and urged to report for prosecution any such cases in future. Also, to have a stop put to the furious pace at which motor vehicles were being driven through the town to the danger of the populace. Given the Council's previous petitions concerning the question of excessive alcohol consumption, it's not difficult to imagine how apoplectic some members of that body would have been regarding such a public display of drunkenness in the streets of the Royal and Ancient Borough.

The incident also appears to demonstrate that at least some of the public houses in the town were still doing a roaring trade, despite attempts of the Councillors to close them for the duration of the war. The matter of the damage caused to the local roads by the Canadians, however, had not gone away. On 2nd of April 1918, a claim was drawn up by Mr. Grant, County Roads Surveyor, for repair of damage to the roads caused by the Canadians. Ironically, on the same day, the Council noted that

permission had been given to the Canadians to use part of the links, which formed a football pitch lying to the south of the 14th hole of the golf course, as a baseball field. Is nothing sacred! However, the matter was finally resolved on 18th of December when the County Road Board agreed to contribute to the cost of repairing Borough roads due to timber haulage damage, providing the Borough paid an equal amount to the average maintenance during the last three years. The Board would pay the estimated balance for repairs, which stood at £227.10s.0d. The Council agreed, finally, to those proposals.

Unfortunately, 1918 began badly for the town. On 8 January came news that Sergeant Robert McKenzie, Seaforth Highlanders, son of Mr. William McKenzie and Church Street, was killed in action in France and Private Alexander Grant, of the Cameron Highlanders and son of Mr. Alex Grant, River Street, was also killed in France. However, along with the sorrow came news that would have made the citizens of Dornoch proud. The Council also reported that the military medal had been conferred on three young townsmen for conspicuous bravery in action: Corporal Donald Murray, son of the late Mr. Neil Murray, Lance Corporal William Murray, son of Mr. Murray, Hillside, and Private James Mackay, son of Mr. Kenneth Mackay, Church Officer. It was resolved that a congratulatory address on vellum under the common seal of the Borough be presented to each of them as opportunity offers.

In the spring and early summer of 1918 notifications of the deaths of young men from the town continued. At the start of this talk I asked you to remember the names of three young men. On 2 April 1918 the Council informed the community that Lance Corporal William Sutherland, 5th Seaforth, died of wounds received in the recent Great German Offensive. He was the son of Mr. John Sutherland, one of the officials of the Borough. The Minutes provide a tragic reminder of his youthful enthusiasm. A member of the local territorial company, Lance Corporal Sutherland, while yet a mere lad, left home on mobilisation at the outbreak of war.



Just over three months later, on the 6th of August 1918, there was another announcement of another death, this time of Captain William Alexander Macdonald, killed in action on the 23rd of July. The Council Minute continues that he held the rank of lieutenant when war broke out and on 5th of August 1914 mobilised with the Dornoch Territorial Company. He was twice wounded before his death, left a widow and young children.

Capt W A MacDonald. Seaforth Highlanders

Historylinks Archive Cat No. 2009_040_07 and with family 2009_040_08



All the deaths reported in the Town Council Minutes were tragic, but there is something even more poignant about the deaths of two young men who had joined up on the very day that war broke out. Survived that war for so long, only to be killed a few short months before it ended.

Equally heartbreaking were the notices of the deaths of Private Andrew Sutherland of Carnegie Street, killed in August while carrying dispatches, he being not 19 years old. And Private Kenneth John Macdonald, son of Mr. Macdonald of Glebe Street, killed in September, again only 18 years of age. Other deaths followed as the summer slipped into autumn.

Each one is tragic of all those that had gone before. However, the end of the war was in sight. Germany was on the point of starvation and the Allies, now supported by the USA the wealthiest nation on the earth, were pushing the Germans back towards the fatherland and the morale of both the German Army and civilian population was on the verge of collapse.

The end finally came on 11th of November 1918 and the Minutes of the Town Council recorded the historic moment as follows: *' 11-11-18 Intimation made that Armistice of Germany had been signed at 5am and that hostilities had ceased at 11am of this date. In respect of the surrender of Germany, of the great Allied victory and the cessation of hostilities, resolved that a solemn service of thanksgiving to Almighty God be held in the cathedral tomorrow at noon and that it be a recommendation that all places of business be closed from 11.30 to 2.30pm tomorrow'.*

As Dornoch, and indeed the rest of the world, began to celebrate the end of the war, mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, sons and daughters of those men who had volunteered are being conscripted into the armies of the world, began to hope and believe that their menfolk had actually managed to survive the most awful carnage the planet had ever seen. Unfortunately, this was not always the case. A moment ago, I asked you to remember the names of three young men who joined up on the first day of the war. I then described the tragic fate that befell two of them. I have yet to inform you of what happened to the third. On the 1st of November, a mere ten days before the armistice was signed, the third member of the trio referred to, Lance Corporal James Mackay, was also killed in action. His death was reported by the Council on the 3rd of December 1918, a month after his death. I'll read the entire extract from the Council Minutes to you. *'Before proceeding to the business set forth in the agenda, resolve that the Provost, Magistrates and Councillors for themselves and as representing the community, do express on the record of their Minutes their sorrow at the death in this terrible late war just ended of another of their young townsmen, stricken down in his young manhood while bravely fighting for his Kingdom and Country, and their sincerest sympathy with the members of the bereaved family, that is, Lance Corporal James Mackay, Machine Gun Corps, 61st Division, son of Mr. Kenneth Mackay, Church Officer, St. Gilbert Street, a soldier upon whom the Military Medal had been conferred for Conspicuous Bravery and Resource in the face of the enemy and whom the Council and community were looking forward to welcome home and to formally congratulate him on the honour bestowed upon him by his King'.* What must have made the official notification of Corporal Mackay's death even more terrible for his parents was the fact that in all probability, news of his death might not have been received by them before the armistice had been signed so perhaps for a few days they may have believed that he had in fact survived the war to end all wars. On the same day as Corporal James Mackay's death was reported, the Council noted the question of erecting a suitable memorial to the lads belonging to the Town and Parish who had fallen in the war and resolved that the Provost, in conjunction with the Chairman of the Land War Committee

of the Parish Council, call a meeting of the inhabitants of town and parish to be held in the Council House on Wednesday 18th at 8pm for the purpose of taking steps in this matter. This was the first step in what would ultimately lead to the erection of Dornoch's iconic War Memorial and, as we've already heard, its unveiling and dedication in April 1922.



Dedication of Dornoch War Memorial 1922 Historylinks Archive Cat No. 2003_349

Dornoch and the surrounding area did make a significant contribution to Britain's war effort. As we have seen, 69 young men died and gave their lives for their country. Moreover, a number of men from the district had demonstrated outstanding courage during the fighting and had been awarded medals in recognition of their bravery.

On 6th May 1919, in recognition of this bravery, congratulatory addresses on vellum were presented to the following Dornoch lads in respect of the decoration received for bravery. They were Mr Kenneth Mackay for his late son Corporal James Mackay, Machine Gun Corps 61st Division, Military Medal, Sergeant George Murray, 1st Battalion, 5th Seaforth Military Medal, Captain Donald McCulloch 66th Seaforth Military Medal and Bar, Corporal William Murray, 5th Seaforth Military Medal, Corporal Donald Murray, 5th Seaforth Military Medal, and Private John Murray, 4th Seaforth Military Medal. The fact that six young men from a small, distant village in the Highlands of Scotland, many of whom had never been as far south as Inverness before the war began, were awarded medals is testament not only to their courage and bravery but also to their desire to protect and support their comrades.

Their names, along with all the others in the town's memorial, should never be forgotten. There were a number of other entries relating to World War 1 in the Council Minutes after this date that I've just given, but essentially the entry of 6th May 1919 is the last really meaningful one. So finally, I need to explain why this talk is entitled 'World War 1, Dornoch and Me'.

I've already mentioned that the title has got nothing to do with either my age or my ego. It has, however, got quite a lot to do with Lance Corporal James Mackay of the Machine Gun Corps, recipient of the Military Medal and one of the last Dornoch boys to be killed in action. He was my great uncle, and I know a great deal more about him, and it's contained in the brief extracts of the Town Council.

James won his medal at the Battle of Cambrai, which was fought between the 20th of November and 6th of December 1917. This battle was probably most famously known for the fact that the British used tanks in significant numbers for the very first time. James' actual citation reads as follows. *'Presentation of the Military Medal to No. 23358 Lance Corporal James Mackay, 100th and 183rd Brigade, Machine Gun Company. During active operations between December the 1st and 5th, this NCO performed invaluable work with the transport, coming up with rations every night and always*

getting these rations there under all difficulties. On one occasion, his party were knocked out. One man and two mules being killed, but he contrived to get rations up by doing a double journey. His actions even came to the attention of the Divisional Commander, as this letter from his company commander testifies. This was written on the 15th of December 1917 to Lance Corporal James Mackay: *'I am ordered to convey to you the congratulations of the Divisional Commander, also the Brigadier Commanding 183 Brigade. To those I wish to add my own congratulations. Your work was wonderful and well worthy of the honour awarded. It is to men like you that I look to keep the company name respected everywhere. Well done, DM Leck, Captain 183 Machine Gun Corps.'*

I'm also privileged to have in my possession a copy of the letter from one of James' officers to his mother, Johanne, informing her of her son's death. The letter is dated 6-11-1918 five days before the armistice and five days after he was killed. It reads: *'Dear Mrs Mackay, I am very grieved to have to tell you of the death in action of your son, Lance Corporal James Mackay. I am transport officer of the company and your son has been under my command since joining it over twelve months ago, so you may imagine I miss him very much. He was really my right-hand man in any work we had to undertake. He was with me all through the trying times at Cambrai last year when he earned his Military Medal and has done valuable work ever since. The Company Commander couldn't praise him enough for the work he did up to the time of his death. He was killed, while taking ammunition up to the guns, by shrapnel and died instantaneously. We buried him in a small British cemetery at Artres and had a cross made for his grave. I can't speak too highly of him because I knew him so well. I am very much upset at his death. I beg to offer my deepest sympathy to you and all in your sad bereavement. Believe me, Yours sincerely, Lieutenant George Steele.'* This letter certainly has a ring of sincerity about it.

James died when he was only 22 years of age. At some point after the war's end, he was reinterred at St. Roch communal cemetery at Valencia. I still have in my possession the Military Medal conferred on James as well as a parchment given to his parents by the Town Council in May 1919. These artifacts will always be precious to me, but they alone do not fully explain why I have such a strong interest in World War 1. After all, I never knew James. I did, however, know my grandfather, George, James's younger brother. George was too young to enlist in 1914, having been born in February 1898. There's a family story that tells of George's enthusiasm to enlist after seeing his older brother march off to war in 1914. We cannot be sure of the precise date, but it was certainly before George was 18 when he went to the recruitment officer and tried to join up. He was refused on grounds of his age but was told that if he obtained a letter from his father giving him permission to join up, then he would be accepted. Apparently, however, George's father, Kenneth, was having none of this. He informed George that he had already lost one son to the Army and had no intention of losing another one. So, my grandfather was forced to wait until his 18th birthday before signing up, which he duly did in February 1916. I have very little information about George's war record as he was extremely reluctant to talk about what happened during these terrible years. I do know that he enlisted in the Highland Light Infantry, which in itself is strange as the HLI were based in Glasgow. I have only one anecdote of my grandfather's which he recounted to my mother, and it's truly horrific.

Apparently, very shortly after arriving in France, he was ordered to a field containing dozens of dead bodies. These were the bodies of French civilians killed in a gas attack, and my grandfather and his comrades were ordered to bury the decomposing bodies in the field. This would have been an appalling task, even for battle-hardened troops. How my grandfather, a mere boy from the idyllic Highlands of Scotland, coped with helping to carry out such a gruesome order is rather difficult to comprehend, and it may very well explain why he was so reluctant to talk about the war after he returned home. However, before George left the army, he was posted to Calais in France at the end of the war. By this time, he was a military policeman, and his role was to ensure that British troops behaved in an orderly manner while they were waiting to embark from the French port back home to Blighty. This must have been a fairly onerous task in itself. However, while George was in Calais,

he met a young French lady called Alice Marie Wall. All of a sudden, controlling rowdy British troops in northern France must not have seen such a bad posting. To cut a long story short, George married Alice, and the couple returned to Scotland, eventually to work in Edinburgh. The couple had two children, both girls, one of whom was my mother, sitting at the back there. When my grandfather retired, he returned to his native Dornoch and lived in his cottage in North Street until his death in 1981.

I remember visiting my grandparents in that cottage on many occasions when I was a young boy. I had no idea that he had fought in World War 1. Indeed, I wasn't very sure I knew much about World War 1 at all in these early days. But I do remember that my grandfather, who was a firm believer in the adage that little boys should be seen and not heard, regularly handed me a large, thick book with red leather cover on it and instructed me to read this and you'll maybe understand a little about your past. The book was a single volume history of World War 1, and I followed his instructions to the letter, even though I could only understand about World War 2. I am, however, convinced that it was this early exposure to World War 1 that engendered a lifelong interest in this most terrible and pointless of all wars. I'm also aware that if it had not been for my great-grandfather meeting my grandmother while he was in France in 1918-19, I would never have been born.

So unlike millions of others, World War 1 brought me eventually life and not death. So, to conclude, when I first became a history teacher, I was allowed to choose the subjects that my S3 and S4 pupils would study for standard grade. When I discovered that under the section International Cooperation and Conflict, there was an option to study World War 1, I had absolutely no hesitation in selecting it, and I've been teaching pupils about World War 1 for well over 20 years.

But one aspect of teaching this topic was missing. Living and working in the north of Scotland has many advantages. It also has its downsides. I'd always wanted to visit the World War 1 battlefields, but travelling from Dornoch, I was going to make the trip very expensive, and this together with the fact that I had no way of knowing which tour companies were good and which were not so good, made it unlikely that I would ever achieve my goal. That is until my brother-in-law, Terry, who has his own cleaning business in Edinburgh, just happened to be cleaning the offices of an organisation called Merck Tours, that specialised in organising school trips to the battlefields of World War 1. While speaking to the managing director, Terry mentioned that I was a teacher at Dornoch. When the managing director asked my name and discovered who I was, he, somewhat disconcertingly I feel, burst into laughter and told Terry that he used to be my academic director while I was studying to become a teacher at Moray House. It's a small world. Terry put me in touch with this gentleman called Des Brogan, and after about half an hour on the phone with him, I had somehow managed to agree to take 35 pupils from Dornoch to the World War 1 battlefields of Belgium and France. I've now taken three groups of pupils to the battlefields, as well as two groups to Berlin, and without exception, they've proved a huge success with pupils and staff alike.

I certainly hope there will be a few more before I eventually retire. Personally, there is something really satisfying about these trips to the battlefields. I feel that I've somehow completed a journey which, in some ways, began in August 1914 with that simple message in Dornoch Town Council's minute book.

“Dornoch, 4th of August 1914.

“British and German Empires in a state of war as from 11.45pm today”.

Thank you.

Followed by applause