McCrae's Battalion: the Story of the 16th Royal Scots (review)

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of London, exist. Nevertheless, it is the first study of the German community in an urban location in Scotland.

Unfortunately, most of those who read this review will not have the linguistic ability to read the book it describes. This is a great pity because of the thoroughness of the research, the command of ideas and the richness of the narrative. It traces the rise and fall of an immigrant minority in Britain, describing the way in which the country both accepted and then rejected one particular immigrant group: Glasgow could be any other location which had a similar-sized German community, whether Bradford, Leeds, Liverpool or Manchester. The book really does represent a case study of a national picture. For non-German speakers, let us hope that it appears as an English translation for it is a very rich work of scholarship that deserves a very wide readership.

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McCrae's Battalion: the Story of the 16th Royal Scots.
By Jack Alexander. Pp. 320.
ISBN 1 84018 707 7.
Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing. 2003. £15.99.

The First World War continues to fascinate. Debates rage in scholarly circles about the nature of the Schlieffen Plan, the operational 'learning curve' on the western front, and the representations of the war in popular culture. These are important historiographical questions. But from our ivory towers we are sometimes guilty of overlooking the impact of the war on local communities and their patriotic citizens who flocked to the colours in the heady days of 1914. Yet it is through such local studies that we might find the true essence of the war. In 1992 Geoffrey Moorhouse published a memorable book on Bury and the Lancashire Fusiliers that hauntingly traced the scars left on the town as a result of that regiment's grievous losses at Gallipoli. In similar vein, Jack Alexander has produced a fine study of Edinburgh and the 16th Royal Scots—McCrae's battalion—that was decimated during the Battle of the Somme. Although more of a regimental history than Moorhouse's work, it evocatively captures the tender interface between home front and battlefront. One cannot fail to be profoundly moved by the fate of Private George Peters—a thirty-five-year-old letterpress printer from Buccleuch Place with a wife and two children who was killed by shellfire in the trenches near Armentieres—when one sits in a comfortable university office in the same street in which he once lived.

The 16th Royal Scots were raised in the autumn of 1914 by Sir George McCrae, a self-made Edinburgh businessman and Liberal MP who had played a prominent role in the city's pre-war territorial force. This New Army battalion was built around the Heart of Midlothian football team and their supporters. The maroons were in dazzling form that season and leading the League. Eleven players immediately volunteered to 'march wi Geordie' and this initiated a wave of enlistments from among the Tynecastle faithful eager to serve alongside their Saturday-afternoon heroes. Soon the battalion was 1,000 strong. In December it was drawn up along George Street before proceeding to its first home: George Heriot's school. Over the winter the recruits were put through an intensive programme of basic training, but the route marches in the snowy Pentland hills took their toll on the Hearts footballers who continued to turn out for their club. Agonisingly, they were pipped to the title by Celtic in the final weeks of the season. In the spring of 1915 McCrae's left Edinburgh to undergo manoeuvres south of the border with other battalions which were to form the 101st Brigade.

The town came out to see them off and the tears welled up. As the train pulled out of Waverley station, the fatherly Hearts manager, John McCartney, watched with disbelief as his beloved team disappeared from sight: 'The finest men I ever knew had gone.'

The battalion landed in France in 1916 and was earmarked to spearhead the British attack on the Somme on 1 July. Shortly before dawn on that fateful day the troops filed into their assault positions near La Boisselle. An early morning mist shrouded the valley in front of them, but the sun was beginning to burn through. The order was given to fix bayonets. Throats went dry and stomachs tightened. Some men nervously cracked jokes; others literally trembled with fear. At 7.30am the whistles blew and McCrae's went 'over the top'. The slaughter began. The German gunners emerged from their deep dugouts, where they had been protected from the British bombardment, and scythed down the advancing Scots. One doomed soldier was seen to put his hands in front of his face as if to shield himself from the hail of lead and iron. All around khaki turned maroon. Amazingly, some brave souls penetrated the German trench system. The Germans were determined to drive them out but the Scots heroically fought off repeated German counter attacks. Sir George joined his men in the German trenches and was in the thick of the action. He positioned himself on a parapet and picked off Germans with his rifle while his servant spotted for him. On 3 July the 16th Royal Scots were relieved, having held onto their slim gains, but the battalion had been virtually destroyed. Of the 800 men who had taken part in the attack, 600 had been killed or wounded. Among the dead were three Hearts players: Sergeant Duncan Currie, Private Ernest Ellis and Private Harry Wattie. 1 July 1916 was Edinburgh's blackest day since Flodden.

Despite its horrendous casualties on the Somme, McCrae's continued to fight with distinction on the western front until the end of the war. Sir George was soon invalided home—broken with exhaustion—and the other surviving members diluted with draftees from other regiments. But the battalion performed with great dash during the offensive at Arras in 1917, stoically endured the muddy horrors of Passchendaele later that year, and then held the line unbroken in a desperate rearguard action on the Lys in the spring of 1918. When one young soldier, a Partick Thistle supporter, was told that he was to be transferred to the 16th Royal Scots he wrote home that it was a 'feather in my cap' to become a member of the famous Edinburgh footballers' battalion. The action on the Lys was to be McCrae's final battle. The battalion was disbanded shortly after through lack of replacements. The butcher's bill had been paid in full. The 16th Royal Scots had suffered 1,400 dead during the war—including, among its fallen officers, Lieutenant Cuthbert Lodge, the son of the Professor of History at Edinburgh University. Only thirty of the 'originals' were still on the strength at the end. Fittingly, the piper played 'Flowers of the Forest' as the men were drawn up for the last time. It was a lament for lost friends.

In 1919 a reunion of McCrae's former officers was held at the North British Hotel on Princes Street. As the diners beat their fists on the tables to simulate drumfire, an old battalion trench song echoed round the room: 'Did ye stand wi McCrae on the German hill?/Did ye feel the shrapnel flyin?/Did ye close wi the Hun, comin in for the kill?/Did ye see your best friends dyin?' At the end of the evening it was decided that some suitable memorial to the dead should be established. The original idea was that twin cairns would be erected: one in Edinburgh and one at Contalmaison on the Somme. These would bear the regimental badge and on 1 July each year a party of local schoolchildren would travel to France to lay a wreath. The Edinburgh Corporation, seemingly oblivious to the sacrifices made by the sons of the city, was unimpressed and declined to provide funding. In the face of civic indifference, the veterans were forced to

scale down their expectations and fall back on their own resources. £1,000 was raised from former members of the battalion and the relatives of those killed, and in 1922 a tablet was erected on the north wall of the Albany aisle in St Giles Cathedral to commemorate the fallen of the 16th Royal Scots. It wasn't a grand public monument, but at least it was a mark of respect for the dead pals. For many of the living the war never really ended. The lingering effects of wounds and exposure to gas would handicap survivors for the rest of their lives. There were also deep mental scars to overcome. The daughter of one veteran recalls that at the beginning of every July her father, normally a cheery soul, would lock himself in the front room for several hours and cry. She never understood why.

Alexander's book—the product of twelve years of assiduous research—will be of as much interest to historians of sport and the city of Edinburgh as to Great War enthusiasts. The last of the surviving McCrae's have now passed away and those who did not live to see old age are no more than sepia-tinted ghosts behind dusty glass frames. The author has produced a worthy and fitting tribute to the memory of a gallant generation.

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Moon Over Malaya: A Tale of Argylls and Marines.
By Jonathan Moffatt and Audrey Holmes McCormick. Pp. 414.
ISBN 0 7524 2114X.
Stroud: Tempus Publishing. 2002. £12.99.

This book is quite entertaining, interesting, well-written, and useful. It is also uneven in quality. Jonathan Moffatt and Audrey Holmes McCormick have essentially produced an oral history of the 2nd Battalion of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders—an army unit from Scotland that could trace its history back some two hundred years—and its role in the ill-fated defence of Malaya and Singapore. With this book, Moffatt and Holmes McCormick argue that, despite the ultimate defeat, British soldiers fought well in tactical engagements.

The person most responsible for the performance for the Argylls according to the authors was Lieutenant-Colonel Ian Stewart, Commanding Officer of the 2nd Battalion, and 13th Laird of Achnacone. Coming from a family with a long and noble tradition of military service to the crowns of Scotland and the United Kingdom, Stewart demanded harsh and realistic training in jungle warfare. Moffatt and Holmes McCormick contend that the soldiers in the unit were 'unanimous' in the praise of their commander. One of them told the authors, 'The men would follow him to hell and back' (p. 39).

The book includes a nice beginning chapter on the men, examining their motivation for joining the army. For many, a life soldiering was a welcome alternative to living in poverty in Scotland. In this chapter and in others, the authors argue in effective fashion that pride in the 2nd Argylls was one of the reasons the men fought so well in Southeast Asia. The sources of this pride were varied. The formation drew family members to it, with enlistees serving in the same regiment and battalion in which their fathers and uncles had fought in the First World War, or which brothers and cousins had joined before them. Kilts, a tradition in the British Army that went back two centuries, also added to *esprit de corps*.

When the fighting starts, the story is riveting, but concentrates on small unit engagements. This narrow focus is a reflection of what the individual interviewees were doing in Malaya and Singapore in 1941 and 1942. Moffatt and Holmes