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Moon Over Malaya: A Tale of Argylls and Marines (review)

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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 16<sup>th</sup> 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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JEREMY A. CRANG

*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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, and 13<sup>th</sup> 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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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

McCormick compensate, using unit histories and contemporary documents to put these individuals' stories into a larger context.

One of the best-known incidents of this campaign came very early on in the hostilities. Japanese naval aviation units sank HMS Prince of Wales, a new battleship, and HMS Repulse, an old battlecruiser, which had arrived, along with four destroyers, to bolster the defence of Singapore. The Royal Marines that survived the sinking formed a naval battalion on shore. Many of these Marines were from Scotland and fought alongside the 2<sup>nd</sup> Argylls, which gives this book its odd sub-title and focus. After the defeat, the authors include chapters on the experiences the men faced as prisoners of war, and then what became of them after the conflict ended.

There are a number of shortcomings to this book. The first is the inherent weakness of a series of interviews done some fifty years after the fact. No matter how well-intentioned people are in answering questions, memories falter, details fade away, and personal accounts tend to glorify the past. These problems are obvious when dealing with oral histories, and a number of the selections the authors use have these flaws. The most blatant was when one of the interviewees fondly recalled getting into bar-room brawls, which probably is a pleasant memory to a man living life trapped in an old and enfeebled body. To their credit, Moffatt and Holmes McCormick are on many occasions reluctant to accept colourful stories without some form of qualification. On the other hand, though, it seems that the authors are determined to use every fact that they collected. How important is it that readers know what was on the menu at the first post-war reunion of the Argylls, the type of socks the men wore, or that the regiment dressed in kilts of loosely twisted wool threads instead of those that were hard twisted? There are also embarrassing glitches that better copy-editing might have caught. On page 351 the readers are about to learn what Field Marshal Sir Bernard Montgomery thought of Stewart only to turn the page and have a new paragraph start that has nothing to do with the Field Marshal or the Laird. Finally, if this unit was as good as the authors suggest—and they make a convincing case in this matter—then why were the Japanese victorious? The explanation for the outcome of the campaign is rather vague and disappointing.

In the end, this book is a worthwhile account. Members of the general public will find it engaging, and enjoy its easy flow. It can also be used in classrooms with profit, but only if the instructor is aware of its limitations.

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NICHOLAS EVANS SARANTAKES

*The Scottish Labour Party: History, Institutions and Ideas.*

Edited by Gerry Hassan. Pp.vii, 255.

ISBN 0 7486 1784 1.

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Surveying the last 150 years or so of Scottish political history a number of significant changes are apparent: firstly, Liberalism was the hegemonic force in Scotland in the nineteenth century, but collapsed like a pack of cards after the First World War; secondly, there was a period of Tory dominance, but since 1955 the party has spiralled in an irresistible downward direction; thirdly, there is the mercurial rise of the SNP in the late 1960s and 1970s, which has threatened to win independence for Scotland, but has never quite delivered; and, finally, there is the Labour Party, as entrenched and as dominant as Liberalism was in its heyday. We seem to have experienced almost unconsciously a series of peaceful political revolutions, and yet, outside of a deluge of writing on the rise of the