

## **Biog 9 Cleweth Donaldson, RFC**

### **Morag Cross 27 December 2013**

The First World War had great 'equality of fatalities', in that everyone, from the very richest, to the very poorest, was suffering from the high death rates. Cleweth Donaldson (1895-1917), a pilot shot down over France, may have come from one of the wealthiest families in Glasgow, but his parents' marriage was as unusual as his name.

#### **\*\*\*9.1**

The Donaldson Shipping Line was famous throughout the British Empire, with its colourful advertising, 'enormous volume ... [of] transatlantic trade' and its 'splendid flotilla of first-class steamers'. The firm had been founded in 1854 by the Donaldson brothers from Glasgow, whose two siblings had also joined the business in the mid-late 19th century. They were 'self-made' men, earning their own money, rather than inheriting it, and Archibald Falconer Donaldson (1841-1907) was the senior partner by 1890, when his brothers had died. [Sources: *Glasgow and its Environs*, London: Stratten & Stratten, 1891, p133; Statutory Register of Births, Deaths, at [www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk](http://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk); Anthony Slaven, 'William Betts Donaldson', *Dictionary of Scottish Business Biography*, Vol 2, Aberdeen, p274-5].

#### **\*\*\*9.2**

Two brief accounts convey an impression of the range of the shipping dynasty's activities, firstly from their own advertising in 1891, just before Cleweth Donaldson's parents were married: 'Regular services are provided for Quebec, Montreal... Baltimore ... Monte Video, Buenos Ayres ... vessels comprise the well-known ... Amarynthia, 4000 tons, Concordia, 2,540 tons ... They are particularly favoured by wholesale provision exporters ... [and] as livestock carriers'. The Donaldsons also imported refrigerated beef from Argentina, , and live cattle and paper from Canada. [Source: *Glasgow and its Environs*, London: Stratten & Stratten, 1891, p133].

#### **\*\*\*9.3**

The company specialised in emigrant passengers to Canada, so that in 1915, when it was still hoped the war would be of short duration, they were still advertising: 'The Fleet comprises fourteen steamers of 8,000 to 11,000 tons ... vessels to Canada carry about 300 cabin and 1,000 steerage passengers and are unexcelled for comfort'. However, the reality was somewhat different: '*During World War I seven ships ... were lost to enemy action while acting as hospital ... transports and supply ships*'. [Sources: *Glasgow Chamber of Commerce Year Book 1915*, p282; 'Donaldson Brothers and Black Ltd', *Scottish Archive Network Online Catalogue*, at [www.scan.org.uk](http://www.scan.org.uk)].

#### **\*\*\*9.4**

A F Donaldson's brothers and numerous nephews, including William Betts Donaldson (1872-1945), took prominent roles in business and municipal life in Victorian and Edwardian Glasgow, but Archibald remained a private figure. In the late 1880s, as a wealthy, middle-aged bachelor, he kept two houses, Elmslie in Observatory (also called Dundonald) Road, in the West End, and the large

coastal villa of Rocklands, in Largs. [*Glasgow Post Office Directories 1880-1920*; Anthony Slaven, 'William Betts Donaldson', *Dictionary of Scottish Business Biography*, Vol 2, Aberdeen, p274-5].

The enormous social chasm between Cleweth Donaldson's parents and their respective stations in life becomes clearer when his mother's family is examined. Jane Gillibrand Lee (1858-1925) was born in Springburn, the daughter of an English journeyman joiner working for a railway company. Her parents had been living openly as man and wife in Clyde Street in March 1851, before officially 'regularising' the situation by marrying in the Gorbals in October 1851, with their first child being born the following year. Thereafter, they backdated their union, by giving their wedding as '28 October 1850', which would have appeared properly respectable by the mores of the day. [Old Parish Registers, and Statutory Register of Marriages, at [www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk](http://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk); Census 1851, at [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk)].

\*\*\*9.5

Thomas Lee, who went by several different names including 'Clewerth Gillibrand' and 'Thomas Cleweth Gillibrand-Lee', died of typhus at Springburn Road in 1870. His death was seemingly registered by his 5 year-old son, possibly an indication of how distraught, or ill, the rest of the family was. Thereafter, his widow opened a greengrocer's shop in Fountainwell Road, between Springburn and Maryhill, to support her five children, including Jane Gillibrand Lee, who was still at school. By 1881, Mrs Lee was acting as a housekeeper for a coal merchant in Park (now Yorkhill) Street, (near Kelvingrove Museum), when she married her employer, a pattern her family was soon to repeat. Jane Lee, aged 21, was by now a private nurse, living with her patient's family in Giffnock. She evidently attended a course of training, because by 1891, when she appears in the census as a servant of Archibald Falconer Donaldson, she was described as a 'certificated nurse'. Jane Lee was staying in his house, Rockland, in Largs, but as a member of staff alongside the other four female domestic servants. [Old Parish Registers, and Statutory Registers of Births, Marriages, Deaths, at [www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk](http://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk); Census 1851, 1881, 1891, at [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk)].

\*\*\*9.6

That a bachelor required a female medical attendant may have been unconventional, but A F Donaldson was reported to have valued his privacy, and to have been unwell for several years before his death. A chronic illness could well have necessitated professional attention, and Donaldson was rich enough to employ his own nurse. The much more unexpected step was to marry the lady, which Donaldson did, in Aberdeen in April 1892. It was a mixture of low-key, and prestigious - they were married by an eminent Professor from Aberdeen University, in the grand Palace Hotel (patronised by royalty), but the *Glasgow Herald* listed 'Thomas Gillibrand Lee, Manchester' rather than, more accurately, working-class 'Springburn'. Jane's mother came from Aberdeen, which may recommended the venue, or it may have been to escape gossip about the wildly divergent backgrounds of the couple. Supporting the possibility Donaldson suffered from poor health, the marriage register calls her a 'certificated medical nurse', although her father has been upgraded from joiner to 'railway contractor'. [Source: Statutory Register of Marriages at [www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk](http://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk); Census 1881 *Aberdeen Journal*, 19 September 1907, p5; Sue Light, nursing historian, personal communication; *Glasgow Herald*, 29 April 1892, p1; 'Aberdeen: Hotel History', *The Doric Columns*, at [www.mcjazz.f2s.com](http://www.mcjazz.f2s.com) ].

### \*\*\*9.7

In October 1893, Jane gave birth to twins, Archibald and Marion, but the little boy died of convulsions at the age of only 17 months. Happier was the birth of Cleweth Thomas Lee Donaldson, at Ashton Terrace, Dowanhill in July 1896, bearing his English grandfather's Lancashire surname. In 1901, Jane Donaldson had gone from being an employee at Rockland, to being the lady of the house with 5 servants of her own. She was widowed in 1907, when her husband, who had been 20 years her senior, died leaving the colossal sum of £253,462, and endowing her with 'a large annuity', or annual income, from his estate. [Source: A F Donaldson, *Inventory Jan 1908*, Glasgow Sheriff Court SC36/48/209, p435, and Statutory Register of Births, Deaths at [www.scotlandspople.gov.uk](http://www.scotlandspople.gov.uk); Census 1901, at [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk); *The Scotsman*, 7 Feb 1908, p5; *Glasgow Herald*, 28 Oct 1922, 8].

### \*\*\*9.8

Cleweth Donaldson attended Fettes College in Edinburgh, and in March 1915, when he was 18, he joined The Queen's Own Royal Glasgow Yeomanry, as a Second Lieutenant. This regiment was initially posted to guard coastal defences at Cupar, and when they left on 1 June 'in two special trains [they] received a cordial send off ... [among] the officers were ... Lieuts ... C T L Donaldson'. Cleweth was probably in A Squadron, as this 'joined 11th (Northern) Division on 2 June 1915, moving to 24th Division a few days later.' Serving as Divisional mounted troops, Cleweth's unit took part in the Battle of Loos in September-October, where the 24th Division 'suffered over 4178 casualties for very little gain'. [Sources: Census 1911, at [www.scotlandspople.gov.uk](http://www.scotlandspople.gov.uk); *Supplement, London Gazette*, 27 Mar 1915, p3089; *Dundee Courier*, 2 June 1915, p2; 'The Queen's Own Royal Glasgow Yeomanry', and 'The 24th Division in 1914-1918', *The Long, Long Trail*, at [www.1914-1918.net](http://www.1914-1918.net)].

### \*\*\*9.9

After fighting among the 'filthy trenches with few strongpoints ... containing many unburied bodies', including Vimy Ridge, in May 1916, Cleweth transferred to the 52nd Squadron, The Royal Flying Corps (RFC) in November. This was a reconnaissance squadron, undertaking aerial photography above enemy lines, and artillery observation. On 24 April 1917, pilot Cleweth Donaldson, and observer Second Lieutenant S R Carter were flying a two-seater 'BE2'-model biplane over Metz-en-Couture, in support of British forces around Arras, when they were shot down. The death toll suffered by the RFC during this offensive was so high that it became notorious as 'Bloody April'. [Source: 'Actions of Spring 1916: German attack at Vimy Ridge', *The Long, Long Trail*, at [www.1914-1918.net](http://www.1914-1918.net); *Flight* [Royal Aero Club Magazine], 23 Nov 1916, p1021; 26 April 1917, p391; 3 May 1917, p421, at [www.flightglobal.com](http://www.flightglobal.com); 'No 52 Squadron', *Air of Authority: History of RAF Organisation*, at [www.rafweb.org](http://www.rafweb.org); '52 Squadron', *History of RAF Formations*, at [www.raf.mod.uk](http://www.raf.mod.uk); 'Donaldson, Cleweth, Discussion thread, *Aerodrome Forum: WW1 Aviation*, started 2 October 2009, at [www.theaerodrome.com](http://www.theaerodrome.com); 'The Sky Their Battlefield', Discussion thread, started 23 Feb 2012, *Great War Forum: Lookup, Photo .... Requests*, at <http://1914-1918.invisionzone.com/forums/>; *Glasgow Herald*, 20 April 1917, p5; *The Scotsman*, 27 April 1917, pp4, 8].

### \*\*\*9.10

New family companies started in 1913, with stated capital totalling £760,000. The business had also formed a subsidiary with their competitors in 1916, creating Anchor-Donaldson Ltd (although both

firms had already seen heavy losses due to the German U-boat campaign). In sharp contrast, Cleweth Donaldson's 'inventory of [his] personal ... estate' gives his worth at death as '£245/13/6d', including 'value of two 5 franc notes found in deceased's pocket' after the crash. Unsurprisingly, this was not the whole story. [Sources: *The Scotsman*, 8 March 1913, p6; *Dundee Courier* 16 August 1913, p2; 'Donaldson, Cleweth', registered 16/10/1917, Glasgow Sheriff Court Inventories SC36/48/280, pp775, 778].

### \*\*\*9.11 a or b – alternates

Cleweth's early demise meant that under the terms of his father's will, there were possible grounds for dispute over how much money his sister, Marion, was entitled to inherit. Cleweth and Marion's mother Jane, and cousin William Betts Donaldson, head of the shipping line, were also trustees of their father's estate. Jane and W B Donaldson were effectively charged with looking after and curating the brother's and sister's shares of their fortune, until they inherited the money when they each turned 25. But, as one lawyer pithily summarised: 'The whole scheme as arranged by the father was defeated by the son's premature death'. [Sources: *The Scotsman*, 13 Dec 1921, p8; 28 Oct 1922, p12; *Glasgow Herald*, 28 Oct 1922, p8; 31 Oct 1928, p2; 1 Nov 1922, p6; 25 Nov 1922, p11].

### \*\*\*9.12 a or b alternates

Marion had married a wealthy ship-broker in 1921, and her cousin W B Donaldson invited her to launch the company's liner 'Athenia' at the Fairfield Yard, in Govan, in early 1922. The ship, named for a vessel 'which was torpedoed during the war', was part of the Anchor-Donaldson Line's rebuilding programme after 1918. It was also as 'Mrs Gemmell' of Park Lane, London, that she took that same relative, W B Donaldson, to the House of Lords later that year, for the so-called 'Donaldson Will Case' ('Half a Million in Dispute', as detailed in the Scottish papers). 'Mrs Gemmell claimed payment of the sum of £500,000, representing the accrued interest of her deceased brother's half share of their father's estate'. The various issues split the judges, but Marion narrowly won her case against W B Donaldson, although the papers didn't discuss whether the various family relationships had been affected. [Sources: Anthony Slaven, 'William Betts Donaldson', *Dictionary of Scottish Business Biography*, Vol 2, Aberdeen, p275; Statutory Register of Marriages, at [www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk](http://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk); *The Scotsman*, 30 Jan 1922, p11; 28 Oct 1922, p12; *Glasgow Herald*, 28 Oct 1922, p8; 31 Oct 1928, p2; 1 Nov 1922, p6; 25 Nov 1922, p11].

### \*\*\*9.13 a, b and c

In 1924, Jane Gillibrand Lee unveiled a set of commemorative windows to the fallen servicemen of Largs, in the same church where Marion and her husband had wed in 1921. Cleweth's name was on the memorial, just as he headed the Donaldson Line's own employees' plaque, embellished with their company flag and stylised dolphins. The large tablet is cast from iron, possibly in homage to the ships' fabric, and unusually, it gives the men's civilian roles within the shipping firm, rather than their regiments at death. [Source: *Glasgow Herald*, 8 Sept 1924, p9; *Evening Telegraph*, 8 Sept 1924, p5; *The Times*, 14 Jul 1921, p13; Statutory Register of Marriages, at [www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk](http://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk)].

[\*\*\*9.14 a or b] **AND ALSO** [\*\*\*9.15 a or b] there are two pictures here; one is the entire company war memorial, and the other one which is to be used as well, is one of the pictures of the closeup of the name of Cleweth Donaldson with the company flag at the top of the plaque.

Marion Gemmell purchased a racehorse, Gregalach, for 5,000 guineas in 1927, and put £25 on it to win the Grand National in 1929. Gregalach was a 100:1 rank outsider, in a large field of 66 other runners, but incredibly, 'She [was] more than usually fortunate to win this race with her first entry'. 'A smiling, grey-eyed little woman in a tweed coat walked proudly beside a big, foam-flecked horse ... at Aintree today ... She was Mrs Gemmell, a very wealthy woman'. [Sources: *Glasgow Herald*, 23 Mar 1929, p9; *The Times*, 23 Mar 1929, p5; *The Scotsman*, 23 Mar 1929, p13].

\*\*\*9.16

In a bizarre and tragic postscript to the Donaldson family story, and the ship that Marion Donaldson, Mrs Gemmell, had launched in 1922, the *Athenia* was to be the first British ship sunk by enemy submarines during the Second World War. 'Within hours of the outbreak of ... War [on 3 September, 1939], a German U-boat positioned 200 miles west of Ireland torpedoed the *Athenia* outward bound from Glasgow ... with 1,418 persons aboard. The vessel sank in a few hours ... and 112 lives were lost'. [Sources: Fred M Walker 2001, *Song of the Clyde*, Edinburgh, p176; Anthony Slaven, 'William Betts Donaldson', *Dictionary of Scottish Business Biography*, Vol 2, Aberdeen, p275].

\*\*\*9.17 a and b [two pictures]