

Biog 18 Thomas H McWhirr, and the War Relics Exhibition

Morag Cross 2 January 2014

***18.1 a and also ***18.1b

With the accumulated hindsight of a century, the tragicomic and bizarre exploits of amateur adventurer Thomas Hunter McWhirr (1863-1917) are difficult to view with anything other than incredulity. A true eccentric, this ordinary, middle-aged civilian went on an entirely self-appointed mission to 'do his bit' McWhirr took the first ferry across the Channel after it had been mined in 1914, to collect 'souvenirs' from the battlefields of the Great War. He returned home with a trunk full of shrapnel and shell fragments, for exhibition in Glasgow's McLellan Galleries, in Sauchiehall St, to raise money for the Red Cross and Belgian refugees. [Sources: T H McWhirr, *Exhibition of War Relics Catalogue*, Mu61-b10, University of Glasgow Library, Special Collections].

*** 18.2 a and also ***18.2b

While laudable in intention, his overabundant (and quite baseless) self-confidence caused a security nightmare, as he ignored military orders, and was arrested as a spy. He then blithely repeated the exercise, in the face of all common sense, in order to meet his soldier son who was serving in the trenches with The Highland Light Infantry. He was also the uncle of the four McWhirr brothers, whose story is told separately.

***18.3a and b use both

By October 1914, within two months of the war starting, the *Glasgow Herald* was carrying numerous notices appealing for funds for multiple war relief efforts, including the Red Cross ('Ambulance waggons to convey wounded from fighting line to hospitals'). There was a special emphasis on Belgium, whose invasion by Germany had triggered Britain entering the war, as many refugees were being accommodated in Glasgow. [Source: *Glasgow Herald*, 10 Oct 1914, p1; 31 Oct 1914, p9; 2 Nov 1914, p9].

***18.4

Over 100 wounded Belgian soldiers arrived by special train at Stobhill Hospital on 30 October. Requests were posted for the Belgian Relief Fund ('£50,000 already subscribed, £50,000 still required'), and the Belgian Flag Day ('On behalf of our brave Belgian friends'). The Glasgow public had 'in less than three months contributed over £200,000 to the Prince of Wales's National Relief Fund', and another £200,000 to Belgian and armed service charities, truly staggering sums by the standards of the day. [Source: *Glasgow Herald*, 10 Oct 1914, p1; 31 Oct 1914, p9; 2 Nov 1914, p9].

***18.5a and also *** 18.5 b

It was against this background of feverish fundraising, much of it organised by the city's middle-class businessmen, well-connected 'ladies of leisure', and church missionary groups, that McWhirr, fitting none of these categories, deployed 'practical sympathy'. Thomas McWhirr was the sixth son of a coalminer in New Cumnock, Ayrshire. He moved to the Gorbals in Glasgow as a child, where his father was a night watchman turned greengrocer. By 1885, when he married, McWhirr was a 'biscuit and confection merchant', but his first wife died in childbirth, leaving a son, James (b 1886).

[Sources: Statutory Register of Births, Marriages, at www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk; Census 1871, 1881, at www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk; *Glasgow Herald*, 31 Oct 1914, p9].

***18.6

McWhirr remarried Catherine Buchanan in 1887, and had another eight children, including Thomas William Ewart Gladstone McWhirr (presumably his father strongly-supported the Liberal prime minister) in 1892. McWhirr enjoyed moderate success in as a 'wholesale and manufacturing confectioner' in Stobcross Street, Anderston, although he did suffer bankruptcy in 1896, but managed to recover sufficiently to continue in business. [Sources: Census 1911, Statutory Register of Births, Marriages, at www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk; *Edinburgh Gazette*, 25 Aug 1896, p822; 8 Sept 1896, p869; *Glasgow Herald*, 2 Sept 1896, p5].

***18.7

The family habit of picaresque wandering first appears in 1905, in a rather uncanny foreshadowing of Thomas H McWhirr's battlefield tourism, when his son Thomas Junior strikes out. '[Thomas] William Ewart Gladstone McWhirr, a boy of about twelve years ...undertook an adventurous journey on his own account from Glasgow to Dover ... where he was found by the police... he travelled from Glasgow to London, where he saw some ... the zoo, and then trained to Dover. The lad was practically destitute'. [Sources: Census 1911, at www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk; *The Scotsman*, 13 April 1905, p7].

***18.8

James McWhirr, the eldest son, enlisted with the 2nd Battalion, The Highland Light Infantry, ten days after war was declared, and his half-brother Thomas W E G McWhirr joined the 7th Battalion, The Cameron Highlanders (date unknown). A nephew, Alfred, also gave Thomas Hunter McWhirr as his next of kin. [Sources: Thomas G MacWhirr, No S/16841, and James MacWhirr, No 9561, *British Army WWI Medal Rolls Index Cards, 1914-1920*; Alfred McWhirr, RFA, *British Army WWI Service Records, 1914-1920*, all at www.ancestry.co.uk].

***18.9

McWhirr's own accounts best give some idea of his odd combination of blinkered naivety and his unthinking 'Englishman abroad' assumption (albeit he was Scottish) that all foreigners spoke English, and would behave as if they were back in peacetime Glasgow. McWhirr randomly refers to himself as 'Mr Macwhirr', as well as in the first person, which allows his earnest and sometimes indignant personality to come through strongly. He first decided to visit his son at the front. (He uses the spelling 'MacWhirr' here, instead of his more usual habit of 'McWhirr', which his family also used).

*** 18.10a and also *** 18.10b

'Mr Macwhirr ... made up his mind to cross to Paris after the retreat of the British and French from Mons ... [probably after 24 September 1914] ... in London and calling at Cooks [travel agents] I was informed that [they] were closed and [their] staff recalled from Paris ... we were pushing the enemy up the Marne south of Paris ... got ticket to Paris ... I tried to get in touch with the HLI. I called at the military headquarters ... including French and British hospitals. He spent three days trying to get ...

the whereabouts of his son. ... Various curios from the battlefields were on view in some ... shops ... it occurred to Mr Macwhirr that, if some could be exhibited ... in Glasgow, money could be raised'. [Source: T H McWhirr, *Exhibition of War Relics Catalogue*, pp1-2, Mu61-b10, University of Glasgow Library, Special Collections].

***18.11

Thus inspired, McWhirr returned home, making a second trip described as *'an immense amount of trouble'*. He narrates: *'I booked for Ostend the day after the mine field was laid in the North Sea, and with great difficulty crossed.... There was no travelling through Belgium without a passport ... Fortunately I possessed a penny stick-back [stamp], and got my passport on Sunday, 4th October [1914] ... the fighting in Antwerp was very severe... the Germans being only 8 1/2 miles away. The boom of the guns was most distressing ... [***18.12 picture of artillery train firing here].] On 6th October, Mr Macwhir ... saw Mr Winston Churchill [and others] emerge from a hotel. They all saluted, and then Mr Macwhirr went forward and presented them all with sprigs of white heather which he had carried from Scotland, wishing them 'good luck'.* [Source: T H McWhirr, *Exhibition of War Relics Catalogue*, p2, Mu61-b10, University of Glasgow Library, Special Collections].

***18.13

'He left on the 7th October, the day previous to the fall of Antwerp... on the last steamer to leave Belgium, and it was with the greatest difficulty that Mr Macwhirr got his precious case of relics on board, as the captains of the last two steamers refused to carry the large case, and but for the intervention of the agent of the Great Eastern Railway, whom I met in the British Consul's office the day previous, the curios would have been left behind... not a pound of [other peoples'] merchandise was allowed to go on either boat'. [Source: T H McWhirr, *Exhibition of War Relics Catalogue*, pp2-3 , Mu61-b10, University of Glasgow Library, Special Collections].

***18.14 a and also b

McWhirr seems to have redoubled back to Senlis. *'Got to ... Rheims ... where he gathered quite a number of relics. At Epernay the sound of the guns was distinctly heard, and Mr Macwhirr, setting out to locate them... was approached by seven [French] soldiers, four with fixed bayonets ... no one ... could understand [his papers so] he was marched off to the military headquarters [he was released next day]. They suggested that I should visit the champagne cellars of Moet and Chandon.. The cellarage contained 23 million bottles of the sparkling wine.* [Source: T H McWhirr, *Exhibition of War Relics Catalogue*, p3, Mu61-b10, University of Glasgow Library, Special Collections].

***18.15

The exhibition was opened on 31 October, by which time McWhirr had collected some prominent supporters, including a former Glasgow councillor. The *Glasgow Herald's* review (which he adopted as a slogan), *'The most unique, educative and wonderful collection ever seen in the British Isles'*, encouraged him to make a third trip in November 1914, reported in the *Highland Light Infantry Chronicle* as 'a racy account'. [***18.16 exhibition opening notice***] Civilians had been banned from travelling on railway beyond Calais but, undaunted as ever, McWhirr reached Boulogne, where *'about thirty hospitals ... being full, a boatload [of wounded] was sent off'* daily for Southampton. *'It was difficult to find accommodation ... I hoped to get on to the front'*. Not surprisingly, the base

commandant refused. [Source: *Glasgow Herald*, quoted on cover, T H McWhirr, *Exhibition of War Relics Catalogue*, p3, Mu61-b10, University of Glasgow Library, Special Collections; 'Battlefield Curios', *Highland Light Infantry Chronicle*, Jan 1915, p33].

***18.17

Learning that his son and the 2nd HLI were at Poperinghe, he *'was informed I could not leave ... I booked by train to Hazebrouck through a circuitous way ... I was in time to see some bombs dropping ... Hazebrouck was under strict military law, hotel[s] ... were not allowed to take in boarders ... no one would open their door ... I had then to sit all night at the railway station, within sound of the guns. It was freezing, and with snow falling ... patrols took me for a spy ... I was allowed into the waiting room. After midnight they insisted on putting ... me out, but I refused to go ... at 6am I was again arrested as a spy.'* [Source: 'Battlefield Curios', *Highland Light Infantry Chronicle*, Jan 1915, p34-5].

***18.18

After more in the same vein, McWhirr left the railhead, unofficially, on a military transport. He saw *'Troops everywhere ...an endless procession of ammunition and provisions, and hundreds of motor cars of all kinds ... Artillery camps ... continually in view ... many graves on the roadsides ... told their tale'*. [Source: 'Battlefield Curios', *Highland Light Infantry Chronicle*, Jan 1915, p34-5].

***18.19

McWhirr reached *'Ypres [which] was in flames'*. He chanced upon the 2nd HLI, and his son *'could hardly believe his eyes'*. The commanding officer, Col Wolfe-Murray *'remarked that their Battalion came out 1100 strong, but there were only 200'* of the originals left. He ran into further trouble at a hotel on the way home: *'Three British officers ... concluded I was a spy ... a French patrol ... asked to see [McWhirr's papers] ... the French soldier... pulled out his revolver and pointed it at my forehead ... Evidently he had no English, and kept speaking to me in French. I realised that all my diplomacy and tact were necessary.'* [Source: 'Battlefield Curios', *Highland Light Infantry Chronicle*, Jan 1915, p35-6].

***18.20

McWhirr added a disgruntled postscript to his catalogue, not printed in the regimental journal: *'I ... appealed to the three British officers, reminding them that my passport entitled me to fair play and protection ... I was entitled to justice ... their apathy and indifference until I appealed to them was most un-British. French patrols are very impulsive, and ... do not hesitate to shoot ... I had a pleasant sail across ... after an instructive trip'*. [Source: T H McWhirr, *Exhibition of War Relics Catalogue*, p 8, Mu61-b10, University of Glasgow Library, Special Collections].

*** 18.21

There was a genuine hunger on the part of the public for 'news from the front', whether morale-boosting propaganda or otherwise. The McLellan Galleries hosted *'Trench Concerts ... by men from the front'*, 'identical conditions' being promised, as when such entertainments were *'organised in the*

firing line', all accompanied by model dugouts, and casualty clearing-station demonstrations. [Sources: *Glasgow Herald*, 20 June 1916, p3; 9 Jan 1917, p5; 25 Aug 1917, p3].

18.22

There were suggestions to build '*model trenches ... representing actual conditions of warfare*' in Glasgow parks, and Edinburgh School of Art staged war photography displays. '*The chief thing one missed about the photographs was the noise of battle*'. The British Museum, meanwhile, was castigated for ignoring any conflict more modern than Trafalgar, institutions being urged to collect for '*future generations searching ... for mementoes of the great war*' (said in 1915!). [Sources: *Glasgow Herald*, 20 June 1916, p3; 9 Jan 1917, p5; 25 Aug 1917, p3; *The Scotsman*, 12 Oct 1915, p7].

***18.23a and b

McWhirr's exhibits, as related in a later edition of his catalogue, included: '*Death head hussar helmet, captured at Soisson, most valuable and rarest of all ... Browning revolver, captured by German soldier, but retaken by Belgian soldier, the German being taken prisoner ... Portion of German shell, struck Pte Douglas, London Scottish, at Ypres ... Grenadier's hat badge, souvenir from dying Grenadier*'. There was mundane detritus, worthy of display due to its quite literal 'baptism of fire': '*Belgian dog bell, found on the battlefield at Mons; small looking glass, found on the battlefield of the Aisne; Calendar for three years (German), found on the battlefield at Ypres*'. And there were items to demonstrate the atrocities wrought by the Germans, such as kitchen utensils '*twisted out of shape by the intense heat*', of the fire at Senlis, where '*the Germans shot the Mayor and 40 male citizens ... also many women and children*'. [Source: T H McWhirr, *Exhibition of War Relics Catalogue*, pp9, 12, 13, 14, Mu61-b10, University of Glasgow Library, Special Collections].

***18.24

There was the proverbial lifesaving cigarette case or 'bulletproof' bible, which seems to crop up in every such story, along with the appropriately-named donor: '*Tin of tobacco, showing where German bullet lodged. Also bullet. It probably saved the life of Sgt Devine, 2nd HLI*'. Architectural fragments included medieval stained glass and chandelier drops from Rheims Cathedral, and curiously, the railway station clock from Ypres, along with the expected bullets, shrapnel dug out of wounded limbs, cordite, British and German shells and rifles. [Source: T H McWhirr, *Exhibition of War Relics Catalogue*, pp, 10, 15, 16, 19-22, 24, 27-8, Mu61-b10, University of Glasgow Library, Special Collections].

***18.25 a and also b

The exhibition despite its initial ramshackle formation, became a touring attraction lent out by McWhirr himself, its course traceable in the newspapers. It passed through Leven, Airdrie (1915), Ayr, Perth, Edinburgh (by which time it had raised £12,000 for war relief), and Dundee, reaching Aberdeen by 1917. By McWhirr's death that year, the exhibition had raised over £50,000 in a hundred different venues. The exhibition was treated as an asset of his estate, valued at only £50, but by the list of people who owed money to McWhirr (a confectioner's agent, so some are his customers for sweets and chocolates), he was possibly selling off items piecemeal, as the fate of the collection is unclear. [Sources: 'MacWhirr, Thomas Hunter', Glasgow Sheriff Court Inventories, SC36/48/276, pp617-22, at www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk; *The Scotsman*, 15 Nove 1915, p1; 30 Nov

1915, p1; 6 Jan 1916, p4; 5 May 1916, p3; *Dundee Courier*, 27 March 1916, p4; 9 Sept 1916, p1; *Aberdeen Journal*, 29 Jan 1917, p4].

***18.26

McWhirr himself was struck by the tragedy he had tried so hard to ameliorate. His own son, Thomas William Ewart Gladstone McWhirr, the London boy traveller, was killed at Loos in 1915, and has no known grave. James McWhirr survived the war by only two years on a military pension, and died of a heart attack in 1920, aged just 34. [Sources: Statutory Register of Births, Deaths, at www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk; 'MacWhirr, Thomas Gladstone: Casualty Details', Commonwealth War Graves Commission, at www.cwgc.org; Thomas G MacWhirr, No S/16841, and James MacWhirr, No 9561, *British Army WWI Medal Rolls Index Cards, 1914-1920*, at www.ancestry.co.uk].

***18.27

A more whimsical legacy of McWhirr's would reflect: *'When the war is over ... On old trails of the British troops through fields and forests I see, innumerably strewn, the corn beef cans and jam tins that should provide a decade of war relics for those tourists who will throng there when the guns have ceased'*. [Source: *Aberdeen Evening Express*, 3 Nov 1914, p2].

***18.28