

## **The Drover's Son and the Polynesian Princess**

While driving around Rarotonga, the largest of the Cook Island group in the South Pacific, a name seemed to thrust itself at me from a roadside gravestone - Duncan Munro. It was not in a cemetery, but that is not unusual. Internment on family land is normal here. Land cannot be bought or sold and, in a culture in which ancestors are revered, it means the descendents are always on hand to care for the graves. But that such a typically Scottish name should appear on a grave in the heart of this idyllic Polynesian island intrigued me. I stopped and read the inscription:

In Loving Memory  
Of  
Our Dear Dad  
628048 Pte. DUNCAN MUNRO  
47th Bat. Canadian Expeditionary Force  
Beloved Husband of Teina J Tuka  
Born Scotland 12/8/1880  
Died Rarotonga 11/6/1954

I had an overwhelming feeling that Duncan Munro may have had connections with Easter Ross, that part of Scotland which had been my home for several years, the heartland of Clan Munro. I also felt that behind the words on that grave there might well be a story worth telling. I managed to locate one of his grand-daughters and did some further research in the Cook Islands, Canada and Scotland and contacted other descendents. The story that unfolded was a tale of adventure, drama and romance. For in 1916, lying in a military hospital in France, his body ripped apart by shellfire, this son of a humble Scottish cattle drover could never in his wildest dreams have imagined that one day he would marry a Polynesian princess.

Born on 12 August 1880 at Achrelvich, on the rugged northwest coast of Scotland, Duncan was the eldest of the thirteen children of cattle drover Donald Munro and Margaret MacLeod who later moved to Dornoch, in the county of Sutherland. His grandfather, John Munro, had been born at Culcraggie, Alness in 1818 and his great-grandfather Donald, son of Andrew was born at Glen Glass in 1789, right in the heart of Munro country so there was an Easter Ross connection. Around the end of the 19th century, like many of his countrymen, Duncan reckoned that Canada might offer a more prosperous future and responded to a call for lumberjacks to harvest the vast forests of British Columbia. It was not an easy life in the Canadian logging camps; felling huge trees with axe and cross-cut saw was strenuous work. Usually in remote country, the territory of the grizzly bear, black bear, cougar and wolf, the camps offered little in the way of home comforts; a roof over your head, a deal board to sleep on and primitive cooking facilities. However, there was no shortage of work and it paid well and Duncan's letters home encouraged four of his brothers to join him in the early 1900s. This was male-only territory and it is little wonder that Duncan, even his mid-thirties, was still a bachelor. But in 1914, in far off Sarajevo, a single assassin's bullet changed the course of world history - and Duncan's future - when Archduke Ferdinand of Austria

was struck down. Within a few weeks Europe, and much of the rest of the world, was plunged into war. With such a horrific casualty rate in the trenches of France and Flanders, reinforcements were urgently required to support and relieve the regular battalions and across the countries of the British Commonwealth men rallied to the call to arms. On 12<sup>th</sup> June 1915, at Vernon, British Columbia, Duncan enlisted in the 47th (British Columbia) Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Force. It was a 'hostilities only' battalion, a unit that existed only for the duration of the war after which it would be disbanded and its men would return to civilian life - if they survived.

After initial training at the Royal Westminster Regiment headquarters near Vancouver, the 47th battalion sailed from Montreal on 13th November 1915 on the Canadian Pacific liner *Missanabie*. Nine days later the ship docked at Plymouth.

Several months of further military training followed in England, until 10<sup>th</sup> August 1916 when the 47<sup>th</sup> were shipped across the English Channel to Le Havre and then transported to the trenches to join the Canadian 4th Division. Arriving at the front, they were plunged into the thick of the action in the horrific and bloody Battle of the Somme.

On 11<sup>th</sup> November 1916, after months of deadlock, the 47<sup>th</sup> were dug in at Regina Trench when the order came to attack enemy lines. Going over the top, they were greeted by the clatter of enemy machine-gun fire and the boom of exploding mortars. Advancing into that deadly hail of fire with bayonets fixed, men fell, screaming, wounded or dying. Despite the carnage, the attack was successful and the months of deadlock were broken at last. But fate was yet to strike a cruel blow.

Duncan's war record reveals that he was struck a fragment of shrapnel during this engagement. However, his daughter, still alive in New Zealand gives a more graphic account of the events that were to change her father's life. Having successfully overcome the German trenches, Duncan was detailed to escort a group of German prisoners back to his own lines but, in the confusion of battle, seeing a group of Germans coming towards the Canadian lines, his own comrades opened fire. A shell exploded behind him and the shrapnel struck with hideous force. It ripped through his lower back, took part of one of his lower vertebrae away, lacerated his bowel in several places, and passed right through the front of his abdomen. Duncan fell, bleeding profusely, into the mud.

However, some of his German prisoners came to his aid. Seeing his horrific wounds, with blood pouring from his body they helped him to his feet and supported him back to the safety of his trench where they surrendered themselves.

Duncan's war now became a personal one, a battle against his debilitating injuries. After first aid in the field he was transferred a couple of days later to the military hospital at Camiers, on the coast near Boulogne. Following surgery there he was shipped back to England where he required further surgery and treatment for almost a year at hospitals in Norfolk, Hastings, Shoreham and finally The Duchess of Connaught Hospital at Taplow, Berkshire. After a short spell of leave to visit his now widowed mother in Scotland, he was sent to Liverpool docks to embark on the *Llandoverly Castle* on 19 September 1917.

On his return to Canada, he had a further spell of hospital treatment in Victoria BC. He was finally discharged from military service on 6 July 1918.

As a token of gratitude for his war service, the Canadian government granted him 10 acres of undeveloped land on Vancouver Island. It wasn't a great deal: his land was mostly a shallow lake. Undaunted, he and his brother Findlay set about draining the lake and turned the land into a productive farm they called Summerland but the demanding physical work and the damp climate of Vancouver Island did not suit Duncan's war wounds. He transferred the title to his land to his brother Findlay for a nominal fee of \$1 and set sail for New Zealand to take up employment with the New Zealand Government. In 1919 Duncan was deployed in the Cook Islands, shipping the copra harvest.

Duncan was now 39 years old and still unattached - but not for long. Soon after he arrived on Rarotonga, he caught the attention of 17 year-old Teina Tuka and it is fairly certain that Teina's tall, striking figure also caught Duncan's eye. This was no ordinary girl. Teina, the understandably short form of her full name, Teinangaro ki raro te Moana Matake'u Tuka, was a princess of the royal line, Te Ariki Marokura Arera Tuarea, a line of Arikis, or kings, who could trace their ancestry back 800 years to the famed Tangi'ia Nui, who around the year 1200, migrated across the Pacific from Raiatea near Tahiti and settled with his tribe on Rarotonga. Genealogy is important in Polynesian culture and Teina's family tree had been memorised and passed down with each succeeding generation in a fashion similar to the Celtic oral traditions of Scotland.

It is not known exactly when or how they met but that there was an instant mutual attraction seems to be without doubt. However, Teina's association with Duncan caused her parents much consternation for she had already been betrothed to a suitable young man of similar importance; a prospective marriage not only of two people but of their inherited lands. Land is wealth in Polynesian society and the joining of two young people, each with considerable lands, would bring more wealth and power to both families.

But Teina was a spirited lass with a mind of her own. She knew the man she wanted. In open defiance of her parent's wishes she eloped with Duncan on a vessel sailing to the small island of Manuae when he went to collect the copra harvest. Their first-born child, Peggy, was conceived during this voyage. In any family that is likely to have caused a furore, but Teina wasn't just from any family. She was from a family of considerable importance and her impetuous act in running off with Duncan had destroyed all prospects of a profitable marriage to her arranged suitor. That would not have enamoured her to anyone in either family. Furthermore, one set of grandparents had been missionaries to the outer islands at a time when the missionaries were trying to discourage cohabitation and that would not go down well with them either.

Teina, now aged 18, gave birth to their daughter Peggy on 11 September 1920. As is not uncommon in Polynesian society, the child of the young mother was cared for by Duncan and Teina's very close friends, Mr and Mrs Hopkins, who looked after Peggy while Duncan and Teina continued to travel with his work among the outer islands. However, Mr & Mrs Hopkins could not bear to part with Peggy and she grew up with them but

always in close proximity to her real family. It wasn't until she was 14 years old that Peggy learned that her neighbours, Papa and Mama Munro, were actually her natural parents and the younger children with whom she had played happily were her brothers and sisters. This may seem strange to the western mind but the concept of the extended family is very strong in Polynesian culture and, in cases like this, the notion of family can extend beyond blood relations. Older people are respected for their wisdom and knowledge, children are loved regardless of who gave birth to them and there is evidence that such domestic arrangements are capable of bringing considerable enrichment to young lives and a sense of belonging to an extended family community.

The strength of Duncan and Teina's love for each other enabled their relationship to survive the ructions caused by their elopement and three more children had arrived before they were eventually married at the registry office at Avarua, Rarotonga, on 6th December 1926. They had 10 children altogether, one of whom, Findlay, was still born.

At the time of his marriage, Duncan's occupation was given as trader. Teina sold the fruit and vegetables he grew in the beautiful valley behind the village of Arorangi; watermelons paw paws, mangoes, breadfruit and taro. He developed a citrus plantation, growing lemons, limes and oranges and, around 1935, built a shop and traded at Tukavaine, Avurua, the main settlement on Rarotonga. The dramas were now over and Duncan and Teina lived the rest of their lives in conventional matrimony, working together to support their large family. Their children and grandchildren grew up and some migrated to New Zealand in search of a more prosperous life, just as Duncan had done half a century before when he left Scotland for Canada.

Duncan died of heart failure in 1954 aged 78. Teina contracted elephantiasis, probably from a mosquito bite and died three years later, aged 54. She was buried beside her beloved Scottish husband on the family land at Arorangi.

Today, the descendents of the Highland cattle drover's son and the Cook Island Princess are spread across the Cook Islands, New Zealand, Australia and Samoa. Intensely proud of their Scottish ancestry, they held their most recent family gathering in December 2004 in Auckland. With over 100 descendents, the South Pacific branch of the Clan Munro is in robust health.

Sources of Information:

Cook Islands Registry Office  
Johnnie Frisbie, Avarua Library, Rarotonga  
General Registry Office of Scotland  
National Archives of Canada  
Military Service Record of Duncan Munro  
Royal Westminster Regimental History  
Munro family descendents: Peggy Rasmussen, New Zealand  
Anna Rasmussen, Rarotonga  
Rodney Rasmussen, New Zealand  
Kathleen Betham, Samoa  
Dr William Hunter, Europe