

# There is a lot of Boers knocking about yet, blowing up bridges every now and then

One hundred years ago this month, a small group of Sutherland volunteers embarked for South Africa, to fight for Queen and Country in the Boer War. The letters one of them sent home to his brother-in-law came to light recently in a byre on the familycroft. Written in pencil on regimental notepaper, they offer a poignant glimpse of life at the front, as HUGH BAILLIE discovered.

At the beginning of February 1900, Privates Alexander Murray, John Grant, Colin Morrison, William Ross, Alexander MacBeth, Alexander Matheson, James Aitken and William MacLeod, along with L/Cpl Alex Gunn and Sergeant David Logan mustered at Dornoch Drill Hall under the command of Lieutenant R G Campbell; their destination was Fort George, near Inverness, en route to fight the Boers in South Africa.

Having trained hard at Fort George for several weeks they had been granted a few days' embarkation leave. As revealed by "Cattach" in *The Northern Times*, of 26th November last, a report in the now defunct *Evening Gazette* of Aberdeen, found by chance by a furniture restorer behind a mirror in Kildary, Ross-shire, tells how "all classes of the community seemed to vie with one another in doing them honour."

On the morning of departure Dornoch Town Council called a special meeting to bid them farewell. Provost Sutherland presented each man with a sovereign, three pairs of socks, and a Tam o' Shanter knitted by local ladies. The Rev Mr Grant, chaplain to the corps, also presented the men with a New Testament.

They then marched, headed by the pipe band and accompanied by "the entire population" to the west end, where wagonettes were waiting to convey them to the station and hence to Fort George. What might the band have played? "Dornoch Links" perhaps, with the accompanying words "Hey Jock are you glad you 'listed?, Jock's awa wi' the sodgers noo!" buzzing inside their heads. More likely it would have been the regimental march of the Seaforth Highlands, "Caberfeidh". Some of them would almost certainly have been descendants of the 800 men of the 93rd Sutherland Highlanders, the men who had awaited the onset of the Russian cavalry at Balaclava.

One of the soldiers, Private Alexander Murray, has relatives still living in Upper Döll, Brora. He had worked as a woodman at Dunrobin and Bonar Bridge. He had a sister, Betsy, who married David, another of the Murray clan. A son of Betsy and David's crofted Upper Doll for many years, and it was in their son Willie's byre that his daughter Betty (David and Betsy's granddaughter) found five letters that Alick had written to Davie.

Alick would almost certainly have gone to school in the Doll, to what at that time would have been termed a "side school" with a single teacher, usually local and female. What comes through strongly is the firm handwriting, the sound sentence construction, the use of the English language in adding colour to description. There are of course some spelling errors, as indeed without the benefit of a Spell Check there would be in this.

Alick served in "K" Company, 2nd Battalion the Seaforth Highlanders. The first letter is written from Fort George to "Dear friend Davie", and in it he faces what anyone going on active service must face: the possibility that he might not come back. He is to write to the pastor giving over the croft to Betsy and Davie. If anything should happen to him nearly all his possessions are for his sister. He is excited as any young soldier would be at the prospect of adventure in foreign lands and far away places.

Fort George,  
Monday.

Dear friend David,

You would be wondrous that I did not write you before this, but we ware kept so busy one way or another that the time passed so quick. We ware served out with new clothing. We got three suits of clothing, 2 pairs of boots, and 1 pair of slippers and a lot of other things. Now Dear friend we are goying on Friday at last, we ware longing to get away ever since we came back the last time.

I am writing the pastor tonight about giving over the place to you. We have been insured by a Elgin Gentleman for £100 each so if anything will hapen me I willed it over to Betsy.

Dear Davie, we will be goying right through from the Fort to Southampton. My old mistress sent every one of us from Dornoch 25 shillings each, so that was not so bad from her. There is some letters in my box, if you would kindly tie them up in a parcel so that no one would get them, and if I don't come back for some time would kindly burn them all. There is a book about gardening in a hamper. If you would send it to Robert Murray, him that was working with me, as it is no good to you, you would oblige. Be sure and write as soon as this comes to youre hand as it will take some time before we get youre letter here.

Give my love to Betsy and all the family. Hoping to see you all some day, we are all in the Best of spirits and longing to get to the front. You would wonder the Differance that is on us since we came up here. You should see us in the khaki uniform, it makes us quite soldier like. Now I must close with love to you all, from Alick.

The second, a short letter, is dated the 27th February from the *Musician* "on the deep blue sea". One wonders had he ever been to sea before? He is pleased and surprised that he has not been seasick, despite stormy weather and waves washing the deck on his two hours on and four off. He will write again as soon as he arrives at the Cape.

Musician,  
on the deep blue sea.

Dear friend David,

I am writing you on the top Deck of the ship. We cannot see land, all round as far as we can see nothing but water everywhere. I am very glad to tell you that I did not get seasick. It was a awfull sight to see some of the fellows, the state they were in. They will not forget it in a hurry.

There is another two companys on board along with us. We had a very stormy day on Monday, the ship was heaving most fearfull. I was on sentry from 6 o'clock on Monday morning to 8 o'clock on Tuesday morning. I was out on the deck 2 hours & 4 hours off. You should see the waves washing over the deck. We are a very jolly lot, the time is passing fast I can tell you now.

Dear friend, I am not goying to make a long letter this time as I have to post it tonight as we will be calling at a island tomorrow so it is very lickly I will not write again untill we will land at the cape. I will drop you a note as soon as we will reach - hopping you are all well.

The third letter is dated October 8th from Smaldual, South Africa. Everyone is anxious for news from home. They have marched for eight days and there is another week's marching before they reach Blomfontein. They bivouacked a night at Kroonstade and a week at Walsh River, where a soldier in the Highland Light Infantry is struck by lightning and two others knocked unconscious. Alick is standing a hundred yards away.

There is talk of going home. They have been marching for six months. He is swithering whether to stay on after the war is over though "there is a

lot of Boores knocking about yet. The rascakles is blowing up the bridges every now and then but there little game will soon be over now." He ends almost longingly with "while I remain your very affectionate friend, A Murray No 6997 2 Seaforth Highlanders K Coy SA."

Smaldual,  
South Africa.

Dear friend Davie,

Just a few lines to let you know that I am quite well ever since I came out here. I was not even ... sick so that is a good deal is it not, so I hope this will find you and the family all well. I did not here from you since I wrote you last but I think our letters is not reaching home, so we are beginging to think, as there is a few longing to here from the old country.

This is the eight day we are on the march so we landed here this morning. I think we are goying to march to Bloemfontin so that is a week's marching for us yet. We stayed one night in Kroonstade - it is a very nice little town. We lay for a week about 28 miles out from Kroonstade, that is a place called the Walsh River, and we had one of the Highland Light Infantry struck dead with lightening and two others knocked unconscious.

I was standing about 100 yards away when I seen a cloud of dust rising in the middle of the regiment, so I said to one of them that was standing beside me that some of them was killed. He had his hat torn also his boot split. It was very sad.

Well, I here as I am writing that we are goying home soon so we will be glad of a rest, just think marching for over 6 month. I put down my name for to stay in the country but we must here more about it before we make a settlement. The country will be different although after the war is over. However it will be very risky for a long time yet. There is a lot of boores knocking about yet. The rascakles is blowing up the Bridges every now and then, but there little game will soon be over now.

Well I must close, hoping this note will find you some time. If it is true that we are goying home I will tell you latter on. While I remaine your very affectionate friend, A Murray.

In a letter dated October 23rd 1900, Alick Murray tells of marching from Jagersfontien to Blomfontien along the railway. He thinks the fighting is over and on an off-duty night he goes to the theatre - which he does not think a lot of.

It was, however, a brief respite. The next day, carrying only their arms and a blanket, they are ordered to march to Blomfontien, 36 miles away, where the Boers are proving a handful, particularly window sniping from friendly houses. He writes with some feeling of the welcome from the English community as the Highlanders march in with bagpipes playing.

One gets the feeling that he is becoming wearied, though the letter ends assuring his "affectionate friend that he is in the best of health and spirits ..."

Jagersfontien,  
October 23rd, 1900.

Dear friend David,

We were having a busy time of it since I last wrote you, we marched from Smuldell along the railway-side down to Blomfontien and we thought we were to have a few days rest. In fact we thought our marching and fighting was over, as it is over 6 months since we left Blomfontien. It is a very nice town.

I was on pass in the afternoon so I went in to the town (you know we have to get our pass singed by our Officer) so I went to the theater, it pased the night all right although it was not up to much.

This was on Monday night so on Tuesday night about 1/2 past 9 we got orders to pack up as we had to go off in a half an hour time by train down to



The 11 Sutherland volunteers who marched off to fight the Boers, 100 years ago this month, had this official photograph taken before they left Fort George. One of them was Pte Alex Murray, whose letters home from the front came recently to light. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to identify the individual soldiers. Can any reader help?

Edenburg station and from that we had to march 36 miles to Jagersfontien as quick as possible as two of our companys was attacked by the Boers.

We had nothing with us but one blanket as we had no transport with us, so we got thare as soon as we were able but the Bores took to their heels, but not untill ten of our men was killed. The Bores took them by surprise before daylight, but our fellows gave them it pretty hot so we were sent out about a mile out of the town to do picquite duty on a small hill. There is only 40 of us so we have to be on the look out pretty sharp. We have to stand to our arms every morning at 4 o'clock. It is a good job the nights are geting warmer.

There is a dimond field on each side of us in fact it is all dimond mines here round about. It is a tidy little village. There is a good many English men in it. It is them that saved the village from the Bores. They worked splendid. You should see them when we came in how they welcomed us. The women and men was so glad to see the Highlanders marching in with the Bagpipes plying. Now we started to blow up there houses, that is all the Bores houses. Fancy the Bore women fighting against us, one Bitch shot one of our men with a (?) which came at his back and kicked him over. They were firing out of the windows at our fellows. I am sure you will see it in the papers by this time. I suppose you would be thinking the war was over but it dose not look very like it just now.

I am longing to here from you as it is a long time since I herd from you. I hope you are all well, I am in the best of health and spirits, while I remain your affectionate friend, A Murray. Write soon.

The fifth letter is from Bethulie, Orange River Colony. Alick has had letters from home, but their pleasure is diluted by having to evacuate Jagersfontein, taking all the inhabitants with them. On Christmas Day he is on sentry duty when, of all the unlikely things, who should come up to him with a bottle of whisky but a man named Sutherland who has been 19 years in South Africa.

He is a native of Helmsdale, 11 miles from Alick's home at Upper Doll. Imagine the reminiscing of names and places. The letter is written on Hogmanay, and his guess is that New Year's Day 1901 will be a very dry one. He hopes to make up for it some day "when we will get back to bonny Scotland" and the letter ends "wishing one and all of you a very happy new year."

Bethulie Orange River Colony,  
South Africa.

Dear friend David,

I received too of your letters yesterday. They ware the first I had since about 6 months. That is four I had from you since I came to the country. Well I was glad to see that you are all well.

Now the last time I wrote you was in Jagersfontien. We ware for three months there, keeping the town, and the last of it was that we had to leave it and we took all the people both black and white with us. It was a sad sight to see the town people leve everything they had. In fact we burnt everything except a few things that they could take with them.

It was one of the best towns, in fact it was the best town in the free state. It had a splendid Diamond mine and they say if the Bores will destroy it that it will take half a million of money to put it in working order again.

I was one of six men on guard in the senter of the town for 3 weeks over 30 boer prisoners, or undesfrables as they call them. So I was on sentry taking in the Christmas and strange to say who should come up to me but a Helmsdale man with a bottle of whisky to wish me a happy Christmas. He was for 19 years in the country. He is Sutherland name.

Well we took 4 days to reach Edinburg, it was (?) sight to see us. We took all the people out of every house we came to. Cattle and horses, sheep by the thousands. You never seen the like. They ware miles of cattle and horses so we left them all at Edenburg. We stoped one night thare.

Next morning we got orders to leve by the next train. So we started about 12 o'clock at night and then we heard we ware for Bethulie, so we reached here at 7 o'clock and I here we are to join a flying colium so I don't know whare or how long we will be here.

However this is the last day of the year and tomorrow will be the new year and it will be a very dry one by all aperances. However I am quite well and happy. Perhaps we will make up for it some day when we will get back to bonny Scotland.

Now I will close, wishing one and all of you a very happy new year. With love to you all, from Alick.

The impression running all through the letters is that of a decent man, a good friend and a good comrade, reliable, unpretentious yet sure of himself. A man who could cope. A man a platoon sergeant would be glad of at his back in a tight corner.