

## WILLIAM SHARP KERR, 1899 – 1971, ROYAL SCOTS FUSILIERS

William Kerr, known in his family as Willie, was the son of a former miner who became a successful self-made businessman. His father, Andrew Kerr, was also an Elder of the Church of the Plymouth Brethren and a prominent pacifist, as were and are many members of that church. As a result there was tension in the family house at Duddingston when, at the age of 18 in 1917, William was called up and announced that he was going to answer the call and not register as a conscientious objector. To make matters worse, William was the only son in a family of six children.

William was an exceptionally intelligent young man with good grades from his school, **Broughton High School, Edinburgh**. Broughton seems to have provided a first-rate education, including a musical education. A number of its former pupils have become famous. One of William's contemporaries was the poet Hugh MacDiarmid (Christopher M Grieve), although they do not seem to have been particularly friendly. William thought that MacDiarmid, who at a young age smoked a prohibited pipe behind the bicycle sheds, was pretentious and intellectually-arrogant. He never changed that view. William was Dux (best pupil) of his year. In his diary he records getting 80% in a Maths exam and comments "Not good!" Usually he did much better than that. As a result, he had little difficulty in securing a place and a bursary at the University of Edinburgh.

As a university place holder, William would have been eligible to apply for an Army Commission. However, as a compromise with his father's pacifist views and because his best friend Charlie Kennedy was joining up in the ranks, William signed up with Charlie as a Private. This decision probably saved his life, as the wastage rate of young infantry officers on the Western Front was appallingly high. Their approximate life expectancy in a "big push" was two weeks. If they survived that, on average they could expect to live for a further three months.

Before they left for the Front, William and Charlie Kennedy (another Broughton High School pupil) had a double studio portrait photo taken of them both by an Edinburgh photographer. They distributed copies of this for their families and friends to remember them by, if the worst should come to the worst. There they are (right): William standing and Charlie sitting; two very godly and serious young men in their sombre churchgoing suits. It is 1917; the war is going badly for the Allies; there is none of the smiling eagerness of the volunteers of 1914. That has long since evaporated. They are simply doing their duty without complaint. They are well aware that they stand a good chance of being killed, but anyway it is in the hands of God. He will either call them to him or save their lives. In the event He did the latter. Sadly, no photos of William in his



Army uniform seem to have survived, although they were in existence as recently as the 1980s.

William always spoke proudly of having been a Royal Scots Fusilier (RSF) and most of his war service was in that regiment. He was in good company: Winston Churchill and Alastair Buchan (John Buchan's younger brother) also served, as officers, in the RSF. Churchill survived; Alastair Buchan did not. But William's name also appears as having served in the King's Own Scottish Borderers (KOSB) and the Royal Scots (RS). The reason for this was tragic: more than once the battalion in which William was serving suffered such heavy casualties that it was not thought worthwhile to try to reconstitute it. The presumably traumatised survivors would be drafted into another battalion; sometimes this was a battalion of another infantry regiment. This is the reason why William wore about three cap-badges in the course of his war service.

William survived, as did his friend Charlie, being finally demobilised in 1919. They lived through Ludendorff's Offensive of 1918, which almost delivered a German victory and might have done so but for the late intervention of the United States of America. William served in France, Belgium and occupied Germany, before being finally demobilised in Edinburgh in 1919. William and Charlie remained friends for the rest of their common life: sadly, Charlie died comparatively young, but their families remained on friendly terms until the 1980s. Such are the bonds forged in time of war.

William told one of his grandchildren that his survival owed less to luck (in which, as a Christian, he did not believe anyway) than to good management. He had been brought up in and near the countryside and that had inculcated in him certain survival skills. On one dreadful occasion, his platoon was retreating through the Belgian countryside. The Germans seemed to be gaining on them, and panic broke out. There were many more Germans than Scots. The Scots, who were mostly town boys, broke and ran. In front of them was an open field gate. The Germans had a machine gun and William saw what would happen:

"No! No!" he shouted. "Not that way! Over here! Over here!"

But they either did not hear or took no heed. Almost all the Jocks ran for the gate and they were all mown down. William scrambled through the hedge and survived, a bit scratched and pricked.

William was a book addict and remained so to the end of his life. He kept a careful note of the books that he was reading and the list is impressive, even in wartime. It included Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Broughton High School had done its job well. It comes as no surprise to learn that William could read French and Latin. Less foreseeably, his book addiction was to land him in trouble.

Normally, William was a very moral and law-abiding person. However one day he found the ruins of a priest's house. The lower storey had been destroyed by artillery bombardment, apart from the walls at the corners. But the top storey was largely

intact. William scrambled up what remained of the staircase and helped himself to a number of French and Latin books from the priest's library, reasoning that the rightful owner, even if he had survived, would probably not return in the foreseeable future. Meanwhile the books needed tender, loving care and deserved a good owner. Unfortunately there was a kit inspection soon afterwards. William's platoon commander found the books. He reminded him that the penalties for looting were severe and ordered him to replace them where he had found them. He did so, with some difficulty because more of the house had fallen down in the meantime. He used to tell this story at his own expense, to illustrate the lesson "Be sure that your sins will find you out!"

William kept a diary during the war. From a military and strategic point of view it is not very illuminating, although it gives a flavour of the times. We learn for example in May 1918:

24<sup>th</sup> May: Battalion moved up. Bob Keir, Kellie, Purvis and myself moved back to Staple with details.

28<sup>th</sup> May: Brigade details formed into composite battalion and placed in Caestre defences.

29<sup>th</sup> May: Shelled: 2 killed 3 wounded; Purvis's narrow escape. (Regrettably, he tells us no more about Purvis's exciting narrow escape.)

William's diary reveals that, towards the end of the war, he was teaching himself Flemish. One of his notebooks contains a small Flemish-English vocabulary. "Potato" for instance is "aardappel" (earth-apple) and "apple" is of course "appel". Less predictably, "garden" is "hof" and "puttees" are "winder".

Like most 1914-18 soldiers, William bore the hardships of war uncomplainingly. He grumbled in private to his diary: "The sergeant-major sent us to a farm for some straw & we made a bed for ourselves but we were wet and miserable..."

Small pleasures, like letters from home and – the greatest pleasure of all – a bath, are carefully and thankfully recorded. Occasionally William's narrative is illustrated by cigarette cards showing places where he was billeted, or which he just visited; even by black-and-white postcards. William smoked during the war, to keep his hands warm, and drank beer. Afterwards he gave up both alcohol and tobacco.

Quite a lot of the entries refer to William's religious faith and his relations with God, a person whom, quite understandably, he thought that he might have to meet suddenly at any time.

It was a relief to be demobbed in 1919. After the war William became a civil servant, moving to London in 1920. He never took up his place at Edinburgh University but did subsequently study at the London School of Economics, where he met Bernard Shaw. He was unimpressed by the Fabians whom he met there and by their

admiration for the recently-established USSR. He continued to be a practising Christian and for a while became a strict pacifist like his father, so horrified had he been by the slaughter on the Western Front. He revised this view when he realised that Hitler would have to be confronted.

Although he was only forty in 1939, William was not called up. Only after his death in 1971 did the reason become clear. In 1939 he was sent back to Scotland, apparently to work at St Andrew's House in the then Exchequer and Audit Department. He rarely spoke about his work, but his family were mystified that those parts of his work of which they were aware seemed to have more to do with Defence matters than with auditing the books of Government Departments. After his death it emerged that he had been entrusted with sensitive civil defence planning against a possible German invasion and occupation. Quiet, reserved William had in fact been a "spook".