

SIR JAMES McGRIGOR, BART.

Surgeon-General Sir James McGrigor, Bart., K.C.B., F.R.S.,
Director-General of the Army Medical Services

BY

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[At the time of his death Colonel Lyle Cummins, formerly Editor of the *Journal of the Royal Army Medical Corps*, was writing a life of Sir James McGrigor. We are privileged to be able to publish the uncompleted manuscript through the kindness of Maurice Cummins, son of Colonel Lyle Cummins.]

PART I

THOSE of us who wish to recover from the past the appearance and manner of Sir James McGrigor as he presented himself to his brother officers as their D.G., and as a man, must study the statue of him placed outside the R.A.M.C. Mess and just opposite to the Tate Gallery, and the even more characteristic picture of Sir David Wilkie which adorns the Mess Dining Room. The statue shows him as a fine and upstanding figure, well calculated to dominate and impress those around him; but it must be remembered that it was a work from existing portraits and, perhaps, from memory, erected after his death in 1861. The picture of him by Wilkie has a much truer note, placing him before us, just as that supreme artist saw him, in his daily life, and with a wonderful expression of kindness as if, out of the portrait, he were talking to us as friends as he was wont to do to his contemporaries. If we require a description of him, we have only to turn to Jackson's "Sketches of National Military Character," where the Highland officer is set forth as a type: "The countenance of the higher class of Highlanders is for the most part strongly marked as a warlike countenance; the face is broad, the cheek-bones high, the visage manly and stern rather than comely." But, indeed, we must plead, for the Highlander concerned, that the alleged absence of comeliness is not to be discovered in this portrait!

"Some of them," goes on Jackson, "certain classes of them, have a sagacity and penetration in things connected with war which exceeds the common measure of sagacity among other nations." This description of the characteristics of the Highland officer serves well for Sir James McGrigor. He had all the appearance of a soldier and all the sagacity, in things connected with war, which could be required of him. He associated as a friend and as an equal with all the greatest soldiers of his time and displayed a sagacity for war, if not superior, at least equal to theirs. Wellington was a man to appreciate

qualities of this sort. We see it in one of McGrigor's first interviews with the Duke. On going to make his reports he found himself in the same waiting room with the Adjutant-General and the Commissary General and was told by the former that, in future, he need not come to see the Duke but must come to his, the Adjutant-General's, office to explain all his difficulties and have them passed on. This was rather surprising to McGrigor, who had been told by the Duke to come straight to him, and he rather wondered what to do. However, as he says in his autobiography, "At that moment the door of his inner apartment was opened by Lord Wellington who, nodding to me, desired me to come in." This, doubtless, was a tribute to the man himself, but direct dealing was the Duke's habit and the method of explaining things to the Adjutant-General and leaving the latter to make them clear to the Commander in Chief, is still the type of mistaken policy to which the chief doctor is exposed, despite the example set by the Duke of Wellington. Here it was a case of two interested personalities: that of Wellington and that of McGrigor. The Duke *knew* quite well that here was a man to make his own reports.

We give this as a case of one soldierly personality in contact with another. But many instances might be found. McGrigor was a man and a soldier. That fact was seen and noted by all his Commanding Officers and all received him as one of themselves. He was born in 1770, the eldest of three sons of Colquhoun McGrigor, a merchant of Aberdeen, by his wife, Ann, the daughter of Lewis Grant, Esq., of Lethendry in Strathspey. We pass lightly over his boyhood, merely noting that he was at the Grammar School at Aberdeen and afterwards at the Marischal College where he took his A.M., passing on to the career of medicine. It is to be noted that he was, while attending at the hospitals, greatly struck by the "marshal" appearance of one of his old college friends who had lately joined the Army and who had come to improve his mind by seeing a few more cases and hearing once more the Professors at their work. This episode he recounts in his autobiography and it seems, at his then age, to have impressed him greatly and, perhaps, to have helped to determine his future career. Costume makes just such an appeal to the young adult! At any rate he proved a remarkable student and, with a second young doctor, Robertson by name, managed to assemble the other students and to lay before them the plan for a Medical Society of Aberdeen. This was in 1789 and it is a remarkable thing that the Society still exists, grown now to an extent that would probably surprise its authors of those early days. Yet we have the best reason to believe that one of its authors, McGrigor, saw clearly the rise and growth of it to a wonderful place in the medical life of the City, "I watched its advancement and its success with the anxiety of a parent. By my own subscriptions, donations of books and continued warm importunities to my numerous friends, I obtained no small proportion of the funds required for the erection of the handsome building which the Society now possesses." The Medical School of Aberdeen still owes a great deal to the watchful eye and the ready hand of this young Army Surgeon, ambitious for the future greatness of his pregnant idea.

THE CONNAUGHT RANGERS

McGrigor now began seriously to consider how best to make use of his life as a doctor with a great deal to give and a great deal to receive from a smiling and beckoning world. After a year or two and a time in London he decided to make his career in the Army, having got his father's consent and a promise of financial help. Accordingly he entered into negotiations with a Mr. Greenwood, of the Army Agency of Cox and Greenwood, for obtaining a commission by purchase and was told of a probable vacancy in General de Burgh's regiment which was being raised at Chatham. He heard, however, that de Burgh's regiment would be an Irish one and hastened to tell Greenwood that he, as a Scot, would very much prefer a Scottish corps. Mr. Greenwood, however, was able to speak with some authority here. "Your prudent country men," he said, "will soon make their way in an English or Irish regiment but, in one of their own Corps, there are too many of them together; they stand in each other's way." We are not given Mr. Greenwood's own country of origin but we should be inclined to think that it was England. At any rate he was evidently a careful student of the after-careers of the men whom he placed in the Army. What could be better advice? McGrigor took it and soon found himself in the 88th Regiment, the Connaught Rangers. Alas for the Connaughts! It is sad to think that this fine regiment, with its glories so gallantly won during about one hundred and twenty-five years, should now, with its noble companions, the Munsters and the Leinsters, be no longer with us. How well I can recall their fine discipline, their wonderful gallantry in action, their splendid appearance on parade; they were one of the smartest and best regiments in the service during the First World War—and now they are no more. McGrigor was one of the first to join them. He and a Major Kepper were the only officers of other than Irish extraction in the Battalion being raised at Chatham. The others were all from Galway; most of them related to each other or old friends; evidently a good lot. This is what McGrigor thought of them: "But I must say there were never a finer set of young men, with more appearance of being the sons of gentlemen, congregated in any corps in His Majesty's service." They differed, too, in one respect, from what is traditionally the favourite vice of Irish regiments; they did not go in for heavy drinking. On the contrary, they had an arrangement by which, at a given signal, they all rose from the table—of the common Mess of the various battalions being raised at Chatham—before the wine had gone round too often and before the results had become too bad, and returned together to their quarters. On the very first night of McGrigor's stay in the lodging house where he and others had been billeted, he heard a lot of stumbling and noise outside his room in the passage and, to his horror, found that it was caused by bringing home the body of a youngster who had been killed in a duel! And, very shortly after, he himself was involved in sending a challenge to a very dear and intimate friend. It happened as follows: McGrigor was just rising from table at the little signal which had been passed round to the officers of his regiment but he was delayed, out of

fun, by a man called Sparrow who placed an arm over his shoulder and tried to get him to stay a while and have another glass of wine. A Captain Nicholson of the 88th was also embraced by another officer and held for a moment just as had happened to McGrigor. Both got free and went outside to rejoin the others; but they were struck dumb with surprise when they were told that an insult had been offered to the Corps, two officers having been forcibly detained on rising from their seats! Had not all the officers of the Connaughts seen their brother-officers being forcibly kept at table when they had tried to rise? It was vain for Nicholson and McGrigor to protest that the whole thing had been the merest joke and that no insult had been intended. A council of officers was assembled, the circumstances were considered, and finally both officers were requested to send challenges to those who had had the audacity to hold them forcibly at the table when they had decided to rise! And to send the challenges they were forced; doubtless with private notes explaining the matter. Both those involved said that they were willing to apologize but this was not considered enough by the fire-eaters of the 88th. The officers were told that no apology could be sufficient unless made on Parade before the troops assembled! Fortunately the two officers were sincere in their desire to get out of an awkward situation and both consented to make their apologies publicly and so the situation was saved. I have come across a few notes about the subject of duelling in an old *Encyclopædia Britannica* of 1877. It may be of interest to recall that it was at its very height in England and especially in the British Army towards the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries. "In 1808 Major Campbell was sentenced to death and executed for killing Captain Boyd in a duel. In this case, it is true, there was a suspicion of foul play. . . . In 1843 Colonel Fawcett was shot by his brother-in-law, Lieut. Monro. The survivor, whose career was blasted by the event, had gone out most reluctantly in obedience to the then prevailing military code." These two cases, both ending in tragedy, show what a curse duelling actually was from a hundred to a hundred and fifty years ago; there must have been many cases in which the event was less fatal or in which, for one reason or another, the duel was not brought to the notice of the authorities. By 1877, the law was that "Every person who shall fight or promote a duel or take steps thereto, or shall not do his best to prevent a duel, shall, if an officer, be cashiered or suffer such other penalty as a General Court Martial may award."¹ Such regulations did not, of course, exist in McGrigor's time but the two occurrences in which he was involved had the effect of showing him the great danger of getting mixed up in quarrels. The second, too, had a further salutary effect for it led to his being told off sharply for drunkenness as, in the course of celebrating the event with Sparrow after the latter had apologized, he got very much the worse for liquor and was spoken to by his Colonel about it!

The 88th was, in 1794, ordered from Gravesend to Jersey, the French

¹ *Encyclopædia Britannica*. The Duel. P. 514. Vol. VII. 9th Edit. MDCCCLXXVII.

Revolution being now at the height of its violence and many refugees fleeing from their homes to the Channel Islands.

A good story is told by McGrigor of a young French Marquise who landed on Jersey and made very good friends with the wives of the officers. Then, suddenly, the news came that her husband had been taken by the Revolutionaries and guillotined. She was literally overcome with grief. But, in the midst of her sorrow, news arrived of a Ball to be given by the Governor. It was the third day of her widowhood and this Ball, they thought, could have no interest for her! She merely asked "if it would be proper for her to go to the Governor's Ball in mourning."

France had declared war on England in 1793 and it was probably this fact that had led to our sending additional forces to the Channel Islands. The Connaughts settled down, nevertheless, to have as good a time as they could. Typhus fever, however, attacked the regiment and took its toll of them; and McGrigor, who had attended the sick, was himself stricken with the disease, very badly, too, as were most of the youngsters attacked. He was attended by his friend, Jackson, surgeon of the Buffs, and gradually recovered but was ordered into the country to regain his strength. How to get there was the question; but the men of the regiment, who had already, no doubt, learnt to value their medical officer, "solicited to carry the 'doctor' to his place of convalescence and this request was acceded to." Meantime, things were moving fast and, while McGrigor was convalescing in the country, orders came for his regiment to proceed to Ostend. The news of this move came as a dreadful disappointment to McGrigor and, though he knew himself to be quite unfit for the job, he pleaded so strongly with Kepper, now the commanding officer, that the latter finally allowed him to be carried aboard the transport, weak and feeble as he was, and thus he was enabled to proceed with the Battalion. Once upon the sea, he gained strength rapidly and was soon on duty again.

They reached Ostend, passed up the Scheldt by Flushing, and landed at Bergen-op-Zoom. It must have been a curious experience. The garrison was made up of all kinds of troops; there were Dutch troops, Nassau troops, troops of the French Emigrant Corps, Germans and, lastly, two British regiments, the 88th and 87th, both of them quartered close by at Breda.

Typhus fever was still prevalent and McGrigor got what he thought another attack of it. Both he and his Assistant, Nicholl, appear to have had a bad illness from which, however, they recovered fairly quickly. This may have been severe malaria but could hardly have been typhus again if it was typhus which McGrigor had had in Jersey. They were now in the "Low Countries" and we know, from the writings of Sir John Pringle, the great military surgeon, how very common such fevers were wherever the subsoil water was high and the country liable to flooding.

"These people are more or less subject to intermitting fevers," he says, "in proportion to the distance of the water from the surface so that by looking into the wells one may form a judgment of the comparative healthfulness of

the surrounding villages.”¹ This most acute observation, the significance of which was still unsuspected, fits in beautifully with the prevalence of the mosquito and explains much of the fever to which the troops now became so liable. It offers, incidentally, an explanation of McGrigor’s attack.

Here the first clashes with the French occurred but very little notice is taken of these by McGrigor in his autobiography. He was probably ill for most of the time at Breda and very busy when fit to do his work as medical officer at other times. Nor was the stay of the regiment there prolonged. Captain Popham, R.N., later to be very famous as Sir Home Popham, appeared at Bergen-op-Zoom and, “on a very dark night conveyed the 88th . . . to Transports in the Scheldt” and landed them again at Bomell whence they marched to Nimeguen. Here they were inspected by the Duke of York himself who was, no doubt, in great hopes of a crushing victory over the French. McGrigor had the honour of being presented to him, a meeting which the Duke, with the extraordinary memory which he, in common with his princely relations, recalled quite distinctly and referred to twenty years later!

Nimeguen was closely invested by the French and received constant attention from their artillery. One knows by experience what it was to be in the city of Ypres under similar conditions of bombardment by the Germans and, even allowing that the type of projectiles were much less deadly as used on Nimeguen, it must have been very unpleasant! McGrigor was in charge of the wounded, not only from the 88th but also from the 78th regiment, the Surgeon of the latter being ill. He had the wounded collected in a large Church and made the position safer by marking the Church with the Hospital flag. But again we are reminded of the bombardment of Ypres. Neither the French of 1794 nor the Germans of 1915 spared bombardment of a sacred building protected by a hospital flag. It is possible that both were actuated by the fear that we should do what they probably would have done in our place—fill the Church with armed men and hoist not one but many hospital flags over them to protect the building! At any rate they shelled the Church heavily and McGrigor, as he dressed the wounded there, saw shell after shell pierce the walls, some of them burst, and scattered *debris* over the interior. At last the danger became too great and he was obliged to shift his charges to another and more protected place. Alas for the Duke of York! “The difference between the warfare he had learnt and the warfare he, in fact, found was immense. Instead of the rolling plains of Silesia the broken country of the Netherlands, instead of gentlemanly opponents, men who fought like tigers knowing that defeat meant death from their tyrannical government.”² The evacuation of Nimeguen became inevitable and was arranged at night. It was obvious from the start that three British Battalions, no matter how good, could make no head against the French nation in arms against them. The troops

¹ “Observations on the Diseases of the Army,” by John Pringle, The First Edition corrected, London, MDCCCXV.

² Royal Dukes. Richard Fulford. Pan Books Ltd., 1948.

were marshalled very quietly and under the protection of darkness moved towards their crossing places over the river. The 88th, after a long wait and much delay to allow of the return of an officer sent for orders, at length got under way at 2 a.m. and very silently got to the Bridge of Boats. McGrigor had some trouble at the Bridge Head, an officer in charge there objecting to his bringing his horse, but a drummer of his regiment saved the situation by taking the animal in charge and getting it over with other transport later. "We were marched off towards Arnheim," says McGrigor, "where we halted for several days." Here McGrigor got a severe attack of fever and was hurried off some distance to Emden, a town in Germany, along with Captain Machonnochie another officer of the Connaught Rangers who was also sick.

Emden seems to have been a good place to convalesce in. Both officers got much better there and, after a certain time, were able to rejoin General Abercrombie's Headquarters, this time at Bentheim. From this German Headquarters they made their way with the regiment to reach the sea. "Our march through North Holland," says McGrigor, "was a rapid one, closely pursued by the enemy, and disease continued to make great ravages." He does not refer to any towns passed on the way but we may presume that the route lay along a course near Naarden, Muiden, Leyden, and onwards. One night, three officers, of whom McGrigor was one, had a house allotted to them and to three reduced Companies. The family appeared to be in great distress, a number of girls and women weeping and imploring them not to enter a locked room which stood invitingly near. Under stress of necessity, however, they broke down the door and entered. Judge of their horror when they found the aged grandmother of the family dead in the only bed in the apartment! The utter fatigue and weariness of a retreat, however, knows no mercy and they ordered the removal of the corpse and, all three of them, got into the bed in their clothes and slept the sleep of weary men.

On the following morning, McGrigor could not leave his couch, being stricken with a severe fever which he recognized as typhus but which we must conclude to have been something else, probably a malignant malarial attack. He was so ill that he could not stir and decided that he must remain rather than go on with the regiment, a desperate decision, but he felt quite unable to move. Then his good angel, Machonnochie, appeared, told him of the numerous officers and soldiers already murdered in revenge for the burning of farms and houses, played thoroughly on his fears and finally got him up and placed him on, or rather across, his horse and took him along as best he could. Once in the open air he got much better. Then a cart was requisitioned from a farm house, he was moved along in this for a day or two, and, when he regained consciousness, found himself on a truckle bed in a large farm where he was well tended by the farm people, an old man and his wife. As he gradually regained his senses he noticed that his shirt was stiff with something that reminded him of dried blood but which proved to be the remains of a mixture of bark and port wine which his servant had seen fit to force down his throat whenever he could!

Let us admit that the servant had merely tried to give him something of use for the fever; but what a wonderful mixture he had chosen! Port wine as a tonic and pick-me-up and, above all, bark, the very thing for his malarial condition! McGrigor appears to have thought this remedy a somewhat unclean one and chiefly as a means of staining his shirt—but it probably saved his life. “The two other officers died here,” he says, though he does not mention who they were; but it must have been a particularly bad brand of malaria to which they were all exposed. The farm-house was close to Breille, he says, a port with ships on it. This was probably Brill, a harbour close to Rotterdam, to judge by the map. “On the following day,” says McGrigor, “my ancient host brought a wheelbarrow into my apartment, stuffed with straw and blankets; on this I was placed by my host, hostess and servant” and this was wheeled out to where he could see the masts of the ships; but it was useless, he could not stand up and had to be wheeled back again. Here he fell into a deep sleep from which he woke refreshed and filled with a determination to get to a vessel next day. Then, a day having passed, he got down to the beach in his wheelbarrow, was helped by a naval officer there, was rowed a long way out to the transport on which the 88th was accommodated, was recognized, kedged up the side in a chair let down for the purpose, and taken into the life of the regiment again with the greatest kindness of officers and men.

ENGLAND AGAIN!

What a wonderful relief it is, even in the most extreme measure of illness and misery, to feel oneself among friends again and to see around one nothing but kindly and familiar faces after a long semi-obscurity of strange voices, strange happenings, strange languages, driving one onwards through a hostile world! And the sea! What restorative can be like the sea! McGrigor yielded himself, with nothing but the half-consciousness of convalescence, to the influence of the sea, the fresh breezes, the kindly attentions of companions, the happiness of getting well. Machonnochie must have been there and many old friends of the regiment. “And by the time we cast anchor at Yarmouth,” says he, “I was able to come on deck; and we now enjoyed what for a long time had been unknown to us, English wheaten bread, butter and milk, with tea and sugar!” This was luxury indeed after the food from which they had suffered for many months. They landed at Harwich and McGrigor, with Machonnochie, went to Ipswich, being unable to march as yet, I suppose, and liking the short journey by car. The regiment marched to Norwich and took up quarters there. McGrigor must have joined them there after a few days, picking up his health again, and re-commencing his regimental duties. There was quite a large garrison at Norwich—the 88th, the 53rd and the 2nd Dragoon Guards and others—concentrated there to keep the people quiet.

For it is the greatest mistake to imagine that England was indifferent to the revolutionary strivings of France; there was much sympathy with the movement in the eastern counties and nowhere more than in the area of which

Norwich formed the centre. There was much disorder around, both in the town and outside it and a large garrison was very necessary. "In the course of time and after the soldiers had had many encounters with the townspeople, we got the mastery of the democrats and levellers, as they were called, and an association of responsible tradesmen formed against the republicans." McGrigor must have enjoyed this excitement and he was specially pleased, during this time, to receive an order from the Medical Board to assume responsibility for the medical arrangements of the whole force; an appointment which he held until the regiment went on to Chelmsford.

It was at Chelmsford that they heard the news that an expedition was to be sent west to capture the French West Indian islands and that the 88th was to form part of it. This rapid re-employment on active service was a feature of military service in a small Army serving a nation with wide responsibilities; and it seems to have been borne with their usual fortitude by the Connaught Rangers. The regiment was destined to form part of an expedition under General Abercrombie, who had commanded in the Netherlands under the Duke of York, and who was now to take on this duty as an independent command. It moved to Southampton to form a part of the expedition which was to sail from there. The Connaught Rangers were now under a new Commander, Lt.-Col. Beresford, a man whom McGrigor at first found anything but to his liking. One source of this dislike was his reception by the Colonel on going to report on his duties. He had got the regimental hospital into first-rate order in preparation for an outbreak of typhus which he feared might occur at any time, and he went prepared to be praised a little or at any rate not blamed. But when he entered the office and saluted, expecting to be invited to sit down and make his report at ease, Beresford neither noticed his salute nor invited him to be seated. After a few minutes, McGrigor sat down and awaited the next step. The C.O. now took the sick report and, after a glance at it, "This state of things must not continue. I will *not* have such a number of sick in my regiment." He implied that McGrigor was being got at by a number of malingers. The latter, on the contrary, informed him that the number of sick would soon be doubled and spoke of the various things that were going wrong in the Battalion.

One can almost hear them at it, hammer and tongs; the usual conflict between an irritable Commanding Officer and a stiff-lipped medical officer, respectfully bent on justifying himself. At length Beresford jumped up, took the Adjutant and the Quartermaster with him, and required of McGrigor to show him all the things that the latter had said were wrong. Now commenced a walk through the lines, the C.O. damning and blasting everything and everybody for all sorts of faults, real or imaginary. Finally McGrigor invited him into his hospital and Beresford had to admit that he could find no fault with things there. He said this, however, without any apology for his previous rudeness. The result was that McGrigor sat down and wrote to an Agent that he wanted to get another regiment, "any regiment," rather than remain

in this one. Now it happened that McGrigor's brother, in the 90th, had just returned from America and naturally was asked by him up to lunch in the Mess. There Beresford must have noticed him and thought him a nice youngster. He sent for McGrigor, therefore, and asked whether the latter would try to persuade his brother to join the 88th. This led McGrigor to a clear statement about his grievances and the announcement that he himself was about to leave the regiment. Beresford seemed much surprised and, later on, sent for McGrigor, took him by the hand, and "made it up" as best he could, expressing his sorrow for what had occurred. He told McGrigor that his department was the only one he could praise and that he had so reported to the Horse Guards. "In short," says McGrigor, "we became friends, warm friends, and continued so ever after." One result of this reconciliation seems to have been that McGrigor cancelled his application for transfer elsewhere, and another, that he advised his brother to apply for the 88th. This brother is mentioned as belonging to the Connaughts at intervals afterwards and there are other entries which show that the friendship was duly observed. So much for a regimental quarrel which was settled to the satisfaction of both parties; both keeping up their positions to the best of their several abilities. This shows that they were both good fellows and speaks well for the position of McGrigor in the regiment.

[*To be continued*]