

LETTERS FROM A GAIRLOCH BOY 1: Hector Macintyre

Like many other local men, Heckie Macintyre, from Strath, Gairloch, signed up for war immediately the call went out. He was one of three brothers who served King and Country during the First World War. As Sergt. Hector Macintyre of the 'D' (Gairloch) Company, 4th Seaforth Highlanders, he kept in close touch with his family, who still have many of his letters. (Extracts from some – though not all – of these were published in the Ross-shire Journal over the winter of 1914-5 under the heading *Letters from a Gairloch Boy*.) He wrote:

1. 16th November 1914 (published in the Ross-shire Journal)

We are somewhere in North-West France. We have not yet been in action, but we are well within sound of the battle line, and we hear the almost incessant roar of the cannon day and night. How long we may remain here, I cannot say. I received a parcel from home on Saturday. People at home can have no idea how we rejoice at having a letter, or post card from home....

The weather is very much colder and is now very wet. We do not feel it much except about the knees and thighs. If the Gairloch people could send more hose they should be long ones, which could fold down during the day and be drawn up over the knees at night. Gloves would also be useful and also pants. Matches are scarcely to be had for love or money and when you do get them only 25 per cent of them will light. Cigarettes are also most acceptable.

The Germans have made no advance since we arrived. In the war both sides are so equally balanced, however, and the Germans have taken such precautions to prepare for possible retreat, that they can only be beaten by a grinding process of exhausting them. At the same time, I think the Germans are now beginning to realise that they are defeated. We don't get much news here and know less of what is going on than you do at home.

2. 28/29th December 1914 (published in the Ross-shire Journal)

Since I last wrote to you we have moved forward to join our Brigade. We had a three days' march to our destination, spending one night on the way to a tannery and another in a school. The country was of the same flat uninteresting nature as that we had left....

We are in very good billets, our Coy. having commandeered an empty house. We shall probably have an easy time for the next few days, or maybe weeks. We had a three days march to -----. On the third day we began to see more and more frequent indications of the fighting that had taken place in the greater number of wooden crosses which were to be seen by the roadside, in ploughed fields, everywhere and anywhere. Arrived at a certain place, we found the church in ruins. The Germans had fixed a couple of machine guns in the tower, and the British artillery had destroyed the building with a well-placed shell. We occupied a barn near to the church. It also bore the German imprint in the shape of a hole made by a shell.

The second day, as we were entering our trench, we heard a peculiar whistling sound, which we knew to be caused by an approaching shell. It came straight for our section of the trench, but burst harmlessly, when 200 yards away.... All night and every night the artillery barked on all sides of us, and the shells clove the air with a sound as of a moaning wind through a forest on a stormy night. Musketry rattled, shrapnel exploded far in front, machine guns now and then interposed with a rat-a-tat. German star shells floated and sank gracefully down, shedding a brilliant light which turned night into day for miles around.

One night we witnessed what I can only call an awful battle. To describe it is beyond me. Imagine the worst thunderstorm you have ever heard. It was as if some trap door in hell had opened and let loose ten thousand demons, who traversed in the air in roaring chariots of destruction. Cannon belched flame, shells moaned like lost souls, and rifles sputtered death and destruction wholesale, while the sky was filled with a baleful cold flickering light, which gave the whole an atmosphere as of the pit that is bottomless. You would

have thought nobody could have emerged alive from the inferno. It was too hot, however, to last, and after an hour or two the disturbance subsided to the normal crackle of musketry, which goes on day and night. Most of the casualties are now caused by those infernal hand grenades which are thrown from trench to trench at a range sometimes as close as 10 yards or even less. Mortars also are now used at a range of 500 yards or so.

We have just received fur coats to wear in the trenches. They make us look like Eskimos. We have just received Princess Mary's Gift. I am going to send mine home.

3. 1 January 1915

We are into 1915. Which of us would have imagined last New Year that we would spend our next one in France? We have just had issued to us goatskin coats for wear in the trenches. They are very warm indeed. They are of every shade, white, black, tan and piebald, and when wearing them we look like Arctic explorers. Their only disadvantage lies in the disagreeable small of the goats hair, but that, I suppose, will soon disappear. We are also getting puttees to wear over our hose. In addition to all which we get regular supplies of all sorts of comforts, and even luxuries from home. The other day we got Princess Mary's Gift which consisted of a nice metal box containing cigs and tobacco and a pipe, and on Christmas Eve we had the plum pudding sent by the Daily Mail.

We were not very long in the trenches when the order came for our Division to have some weeks rest. The following morning, Christmas Day, we left and after two days marching arrived here. This is a mining village. We have been billeted in an empty house, where we have made ourselves very comfortable. Had two parcels from home yesterday. Recipients of contents very grateful. Wishing you all a "Happy New Year".

4. 6 January 1915

Christmas Day we spent on the march, but Christmas Eve we passed in our barn, or cowshed, holding a Gaelic and English concert. Ghillie sang the "British and the Brunswickers" and "The Alma", both of which were lustily encored. A fitting accompaniment was played by our artillery, which boomed on all sides of us. We were then under orders to proceed again to the trenches on Christmas Day, and so we departed for here.

Most of the fighting done in the trenches is done by the use of hand grenades, and trench mortar bombs. The trenches are so near one another that the opposing parties can hear each other speak. Progress can only be made by sapping up to within a few yards of the opposing trench, and then digging a parallel trench, and blowing in that of the enemy. We have now to save all the empty jam tins to be used in making bombs.

On New Year's Day we had some sports here. There were races 100 Yds, a mile relay race etc. and D Company carried off practically everything. The races were followed by a 'Tug of War'. After some strenuous pulls D. Coy. found itself in the final with H. Coy, which D. won in a canter. There was also a football match yesterday between the 1st and 4th, which the latter won.

On New Year's Eve D. and E. Coys. had a concert in a barn here. There were some really fine renderings of Gaelic, and English, songs, sentimental and comic. Our concert concluded at 12 p.m. with the singing of 'Auld Lang Syne' and 'God save the King', and amidst all round hand shaking we proceeded home to our billets, everybody feeling himself a better man for the enjoyable experiences he had had.

The weather is now very wet, and exceedingly stormy, but not so cold. We have been doing a little trench digging since we came here, merely for practice.

5. 11/12th February 1915

On the evening of the second day we spent here, we set out for the trenches as soon as it was dark enough to do so with comparative safety. We had not gone a mile when the bullets began to whistle and hum over our heads. Every now and then one would whirl by close to you with a venomous spit while the air was filled with the disappointed whine of bullets that had missed their billet. Now and then the Germans opened fire with a Maxim on certain parts of the road.

The trenches contained as much water as the River Kelvin and three times as much mud, and our boys were waist deep in water all the time they occupied them (some 12 and some 14-16 hours). The state of the trenches was so bad that we only sent a small body of men to occupy the fire trench (who were relieved every 12 hours) All the time they were up to the waist in icy cold water, and there were 2 to 3 inches of snow on the ground. The whole area was infested with snipers who fired at you from you knew not where. The Battalion suffered six casualties only, which was slight considering that the one we relieved had 28 in the same time and under similar conditions. Having put in our time in the trenches we marched back to complete our rest and rejoin our own Division.

We have now been out here for more than three months, during which time there has not been 100 yards progress made along the greater part of the front. The last day we were down in the trenches our big guns dropped 15 huge shells, one after the other, in quick succession, right into the German trench opposite. The explosions were terrible to witness. Dense clouds of earth were thrown up in the air. When you consider that these shells were fired from as far back as six miles, and that our trenches were in place less than 100 yards from those of the Germans, you can realise how fine was the marksmanship of our gunners.

Hector Macintyre was badly wounded, with serious injuries to both legs, during the Battle of Neuve Chapelle on 10 March 1915. He continued to write to his family during a long convalescence and more of his correspondence can be read in *World War I – The Story of One Family from Gairloch*.

LETTERS FROM A GAIRLOCH BOY 2: John Macintyre

John (Johnnie) Macintyre was the youngest of the three brothers from Strath, Gairloch. He was in his third year at Medical School in Glasgow when the War began. His letters to family members through the first 18 months frequently express his frustration that he could not join the services and are quite critical of those who might have volunteered to serve but chose not to. These extracts from his letters are from the period after he successfully enlisted in the Royal Navy. Johnnie was drowned on 31 May 1916, aged 22 when his ship, the Ardent, was sunk by German fire at the Battle of Jutland. He is buried in Tonsberg Old Cemetery, Norway.

Letter 1

Glasgow W.
7th June '15

My dear Heckie,

It so happens that my note this week falls to be written in Glasgow, and the raison d'être is this: I am no longer plain J. E. MacIntyre, but Surgeon-Probationer J. E. M. R.N.V.R. I am down here being fitted with uniform, that of a sub-lieutenant of the R.N.V.R. with a red hand denoting the medical branch. I expect to get home again ere I join a boat.

On the journey south I had Grant as company as far as Dingwall. He was on his way to report himself at headquarters having, as you know, got a commission in the 3/4ths. That day also a big crowd of Gairloch lads went home on furlough previous to leaving for France. A good number also left the west-going train at Garve, en route for Ullapool.

At Garve too, a young officer joined our train, a boyish chap, with a careworn face, stiff legs, stained uniform, everything giving signs of long strain, and who should it be but young Fraser of the Seaforths, seemingly on his way back after furlough. And as he moved wearily among the hosts of untried soldiers at Inverness station I couldn't help thinking that, of all the officers there, he was most worthy of a salute and yet the soldiers probably avoided him. I felt sorry for him going back again, for he looked so weary, his legs were stiff & his tanned face was so serious.

My carriage was full of men in uniform, Seaforths, Marines and Bluejackets, and I was the only member not in uniform. It is a trying experience these days in a northern train for they are always crowded with soldiers & sailors, & you being a nothing, don't count.

I have only been here two days but am tired of it. Soldiers, hands & recruiting sergeants meet you at every step, & unless you are in uniform, you have not the life of a dog. Yet the city is crammed full of young fellows wandering about in flannel trousers, golf jackets, soft hats, as if nothing in the world were happening, certainly not as if their neighbours were being torn & holed & mutilated every moment of the day for them.

*Your loving brother
Johnnie.*

Letter 2

HMS Ardent
4th Flotilla

My dear Heckie,

....

Since I wrote last we had a spell of very bad weather, so wet & cold that we thought we had seen the last of the summer. But no, here we are again, & today is very fine, & I believe would be very warm were it not for a dense, very dense fog.

We have been doing a lot of running just lately but Germans are as scarce as ever they were. I wonder if they mean to come out at all. It would be much easier if they did and we should not have so much to do - after.

This confounded fog has delayed the mail....

Letter 3

Monday

HMS Ardent
4th Flotilla

My dear Heckie,

...

Early last week we had two days of the North Sea at its worst. I never thought there could be such enormous waves. They threw us about & played with us as the biggest Gairloch seas would do with "Hisies" boat. Going against them they drenched the whole deck & we ran up and down them like the Scenic Railway. Side on we rattled till everything in the wardroom that was loose struggled in a confused heap all over the place. Running with it was easier on the ship and, standing in the hatchway, you could see the huge waves chasing you, & rising so high above the ship that it seemed certain they would rush right over us. Then they would fall away & the stern would be thirty feet or more above the nearest water. At times it left the stern completely and that was bad for the propeller's speed. So huge did the flowing seas get that everything aft was closed down ...

The only person who took meals all the time was the 1st Lieut. who would dine serenely looping the loop. The others of us postponed eating till we got back. I was sick only the first portion of the first day but it was so difficult to eat that I did without. The way a destroyer jumps about is simply awful. She is always rolling, but in a gale at sea like this she gives the most fearsome leaps into wave troughs & the fall makes the ship judder all over most frightfully....

Everything is being prepared for the coming winter and just as with the men in the trenches, there will be many minor comforts this time that were missing last winter. You can't get the "German" Ocean to keep quiet though.

Letter 4

11th Nov. '15

HMS Ardent
4th Flotilla

My dear Heckie,

....

We had a nasty night after leaving dock, very nasty, but it was a picnic compared to yesterday & the day before. We were shaken almost to bits; we had seas right over us every thirty seconds; we had water swishing about in the wardroom & everywhere. It is on a day like this you want your reporters to come to see what the navy is doing. It was absolutely dangerous to show yourself on deck. I wasn't sick tho' I was the night after leaving dock.

The men on watch are, of course, wet through with cold North Sea & to make their discomfort greater, there are continual showers of hail, & a piercing wind, while on order to keep their feet they have to hold on like grim death to iron stanchions, or even to tie themselves. Considering too, that they most of them do their work almost 1000 miles nearer to the North Pole than the trenches in Flanders are, I don't think the soldiers ever need envy them.

The Sinking of the Ardent at the Battle of Jutland: Lieutenant-Commander Marsden

Only two men survived the sinking of the Ardent on 31 May 1916, one rating and Lt. Commander Marsden. He wrote:

... I attacked at once, and from a very close range our remaining torpedoes were fired, but before I could judge their effect the enemy switched on searchlights. I then became aware that the ARDENT was taking on a division of German battleships. Our guns were useless against such adversaries; we could do no more than wait for the first salvo. At last it came; shell after shell hit us, our speed diminished and then we stopped. Our three guns ceased firing one by one. I was wounded but felt no great pain or discomfort though eventually a piece of shell as big as my little finger was taken out of me. When the enemy suddenly switched off lights and ceased fire, I could feel the ship sinking and told my First Lieutenant to get out the boats and rafts, or what might be left of them, to try to save as many of the crew as possible. A terrible scene of destruction was revealed as I walked aft (with some difficulty). All boats were in pieces, the funnels looked more like nutmeg graters. The rafts were blown to bits, and in the ship's deck and sides were holes innumerable. In this very still atmosphere, the steam and smoke poured out from the holes in the deck perfectly straight up into the air. Several of my best men came up and tried to console me and all were delighted that we had at length been in action and done our share. But many were already killed and lay around their guns and places of duty...

I passed the word for each man to look out for himself. Then all of a sudden we were again lit by searchlights and the enemy poured in four or five salvos at point blank range. The ARDENT gave a big lurch ... another lurch and the ship heeled right over, and threw me to the ship's side. I could feel she was going, so I flopped over into the sea, grabbing a lifebuoy that was providentially at hand. The ARDENT's stern kept up a few moments then she slowly sank from view. As the smoke and steam cleared off I could see many heads in the water – about forty or fifty I should think. There was no support beyond life-belts, lifebuoys, and floating waistcoats, so I was afraid that few of us could possibly survive, especially as I realised that all the destroyers had gone on, and that no big ship would dare to stop, even if they saw us in the water. I spoke to my men and saw most of them die, one by one. Not a man of them showed any fear of death, and there was not a murmur, complaint, or cry for help from a single soul. Their joy was, and they talked about it to the end, that they and the ARDENT had "done their bit", as they put it.

Whilst there were still many alive, a German came close and fired a star shell over us. I could see her distinctly, and was all for giving her a hail, but the men all said "No"; they would sooner take the remote chance of being saved by an English ship than be a prisoner in Germany. None of the men seemed to suffer at all; they just seemed to lie back and go to sleep.

After a long, weary while the sun came up. I dropped into a sort of sleep several times, only to be awakened by waves slapping into my face. There was quite a swell. Finally I woke to find the MARKSMAN close alongside me. I sang out for help and got a welcome and reassuring shout, then once again relapsed into unconsciousness. I have no recollection of being got onboard just after 0600.

LETTERS FROM A GAIRLOCH BOY 3: Alexander Macintyre

Alexander Macintyre, from Strath, Gairloch, was the eldest of the three Macintyre brothers. He was already qualified as a doctor when the War started and was working in Airdrie. He served as a Medical Officer for the last two and a half years of the War.

He wrote from France **4 November 1916**:

My dear Heckie,

Many thanks for your letter. You must have had some record storms of rain. We are having plenty here. I wish it would cease as it is hindering us from getting a move on....

I think I'll just tell you what the evening is like for there is such a grand sunset that it makes one feel in a mood for poetry. Well, it is sunset. Dark night has come down, so to speak, within a few feet of the western horizon. In the interval in the west between the night-black dense clouds that overhang the world, the sky is of an intense bright salmon red. The fringed lower margins of the cloud shines a beautiful lilac & mauve silhouetted against the red sky. The lower surface of the cloud away west is shaded in darker mauves to look like landscapes with irregular rows of trees & forests, valleys and hills as if another world of a different hue were coming down from the skies to rest on ours. It is beautiful. Yes, the sunsets out here are glorious but tonight there is beauty only in the sunset in the west. All the rest is mud & gloom & darkness & threats of rain & storm....

On the landscape away west everything looks peaceful & still & the ridges & rows of poplars pass west to get lost in the pink haze but in the fields where you look, as numerous as the corn-stooks in the harvest, there are tents all shade of muddy colours and the smoke of a thousand camp fires in straight pillars in the air and along the ridge half a mile away you can see a column of mounted men, silhouetted against the sky, pass along and go out of sight in the wood. To the eye everything looks peace & rest of evening coming down on the land but suddenly over yonder in the woods the eye is caught by a strange bright flash springing out of the ground. Then next moment to the left four flashes succeed one another in quick succession & before you have got your eye fixed on the spot four others spring away & to the right. After a short pause come the bang, bang, bang & again the bang, bang, bang & the shrieks & the moans of the great guns firing & the big shells passing over to the east while a few seconds afterwards come the peculiar sound of the shells exploding in the enemy lines like someone in the distance dropping heavy loads on to the bottom of a great empty tank. There is no peace in the evening.

Even from the very vault of heaven some invisible uncanny devil is busy throwing down flaming torches of bright fire. What an actor man is. Here on this terrible stage he seems to enact over again all the terrible things mankind has had to come through in the past against all the forces of nature & the wild. What does it all mean?... All the reasons our learning can bring forward are not sufficient, for man acts through an instinct that lies deeper than reason. Yes, even man acts first by instinct & finds out the reason afterwards....

At night the scene is weird indeed. Away east on the near horizon bright star-lights rise & fall in wide curves ceaselessly & out of every field there spring sudden spouts of fire & the beating on one's eardrums is endless & deafening while the distant big guns light up the whole sky with momentary bright flashes like lightning. Along the roads, troops & lorries & cars pass back in forth in endless streams & as you go you have to brush through swarms of silent men whom you see only through the moments of the brightest flashes. In the midst of the thunder of guns you hear all around you the sound of the crunching wheels & the tramping feet of invisible motors & men & you have to develop senses like the cat to feel your way through and you begin to feel yourself a wild beast among wild beasts in the wild....

Ambitious soldiers have planned & produced vast & perfect war machines, the admiration of the whole world, & have gone forth in confidence seeking great gains, only, in spite of all, to be swept away at the height of their glory & all their evil influences & institutions eliminated.... Yes, this great war goes on now ... and it must go on & we must suffer until humanity has learned its great lesson from the evil fate that shall

befall all those of the enemy Among the dark clouds they have called up over the world, over the battlefield which they have manured with corpses expecting a harvest of great power and wealth, the finger of God shall point a way to those whose motives are only justice & right and there shall be a victory which, let us hope, shall prove to mankind once and for all the vanity of war....

*Love to all from
Your affectionate brother,
Alick.*