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Opening extract from

Scottish Tales of Adventure World War 1

Written by

Alan Burnett

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Introduction

'Lads, you're wanted! Over there,'
Shiver in the morning dew,
More poor devils like yourselves
Waiting to be killed by you.
Ewart Alan Mackintosh

Merry it was to laugh there –
Where death becomes absurd and life absurder.
For power was on us as we slashed bones bare
Not to feel sickness or remorse of murder.
Wilfred Owen

In this book of stories from the First World War, soldiers dodge snipers' bullets and hurl grenades at the unseen enemy while experimental breathing apparatus shields them from deadly gas. Men piloting an amazing new invention called the aeroplane zoom through the clouds with guns blazing at their opponents.

Pioneering women doctors and their staff save soldiers' lives while they are bombarded with cannon-fire and chased through foreign lands.

They are stories of adventure and excitement, of courage and optimism. They are tales of triumph in adversity. But the First World War is also a story of death and destruction on a gigantic scale, of intolerable misery and cruelty, often with no way out and no happy endings.

For me, these two sides to the war – the exhilarating and the miserable – are equally important. We need both to make sense of it, to comprehend why people went to fight in the first place, and to understand why there was so much regret after it was all over.

That is why the stories in this book also show aspects of the war's dark side. They demonstrate, too, how a soldier's fortunes often depended on luck. Some people believe that luck is just down to chance, like rolling a dice. But others believe it is down to destiny or fate. In other words, a life-changing bit of luck is somehow *meant* to happen.

Take the moment that led to the outbreak of the First World War. It took place on a street corner in a city called Sarajevo, the capital of what was then Bosnia. Back in the summer of 1914 a teenager called Gavrilo Princip stood there and pulled out a pistol. He took aim and shot dead a man called Archduke Franz Ferdinand.

The Archduke had been a very important person, and his friends swore revenge on Mr Princip and his friends. One thing led to another, and eventually whole empires took sides over the issue, like gangs fighting in a playground – but on a far, far bigger scale. On Mr Princip's side were the Russian, French and British empires, of which Scotland was part. And on the other side were the empires of Austro-Hungary, Turkey and Germany. The result was the First World War.

When I was twelve years old, I stood in the exact spot where Mr Princip had fired his gun more than three quarters of a century earlier. I felt as though the assassin was still there, standing right next to me, and taking aim at his victim. What would have happened, I wondered, if by chance the bullet had missed? The chain of events that followed might have been avoided. Yet, perhaps the world was simply destined to go to war. The big empires were looking for an excuse to fight, and now they had it.

My experience in Sarajevo led me to think about other important questions too. Like, what did the First World War have to do with me? In time, I found some interesting answers. I visited another city called Ypres in Belgium. You will read about what happened there in this book. Some of the biggest and bloodiest battles of the First World War were fought around Ypres. The place was flattened and had to be rebuilt.

A huge number of Scottish soldiers died there. In fact Scotland lost more men per head of population during the First World War than any other country except Turkey and Serbia. What's more, I learned that at least two of my own great-grandfathers – and a great-great grandfather – had all fought in that war in a regiment called the Royal Scots. One of them was sent to fight in a place called Gallipoli, in Turkey. One day, the battle trench he was in was hit by a bomb and it collapsed on top of him. Eventually his wiggling fingers could be seen protruding from the rubble and he was pulled out alive. Many of his friends were not as lucky.

These discoveries brought the war much closer to home. Eventually I realised that the First World War had everything to do with my life, and with Scotland, the country I grew up in. Every street, farm and island has its share of amazing and sorrowful First World War stories to tell. Chiselled into stone memorials in cities, towns and villages across the country are the names of the men who died. The world they left behind was changed for ever.

The war brought new technology and new ways of doing things, as well as great anger about the loss of life. The people of Scotland were deeply affected. There is a hill with two summits that overlooks Edinburgh, the nation's capital, from the south-west. The hill, known as Craiglockhart, is adorned by woods, a golf course and some grand Victorian buildings. Craiglockhart Hill gives a fine view of Edinburgh, where, during the First World War, huge cigar-shaped German airships hung in the sky next to the castle and dropped their bombs.

Edinburgh was the home town of Field Marshall Douglas Haig, commander of the British forces. Many historians believe the Allied victory that ended the First World War in 1918 was largely thanks to Haig's determined leadership, his inspirational battle tactics and his ability to rally the troops. At least, that is one side of the story. The other way of looking at it is that Haig, and other war leaders, made errors that doomed hundreds of thousands of men to a miserable death.

That was the opinion of one wounded English officer who looked out over Edinburgh from Craiglockhart Hill in the autumn of 1917. His name was Wilfred Owen. He was a patient at Craiglockhart War Hospital, a building that still stands on the hill today as part of Edinburgh Napier University.

Owen was treated for an illness called 'shell shock' caused by the stress of intense combat in the trenches. During his treatment at the hospital Owen played golf, taught at a local school, and became friends with another patient called Siegfried Sassoon.

Sassoon wrote poetry to express his feelings about the war. He encouraged Owen to do the same. Eventually Owen was considered well enough to return to duty, but he was killed in battle in November 1918, just a few days before the war ended.

Another powerful poet who was killed in action during the war was Alan Ewart Mackintosh. He was a Gaelic-speaker and bagpipe player whose family came from the Highlands. His Scottish regiment, the Seaforth Highlanders, was led proudly into battle by pipes and drums only for its young recruits to be smashed and broken in their hundreds by bombs and bullets.

The words of Mackintosh and Owen continue to live and grow long after the poets' lives were cut short. Their poetry emphasises the barbarity and hopelessness of the First World War. But even so, their words are beautiful.

By showing us the worst of what human beings are capable of, it makes us try harder to bring out the best.

CHAPTER 1

The Teacher Threw a Bomb

At around 9.30pm torchlights appeared at the far end of the street, accompanied by music and marching boots. 'The soldiers are coming!' shouted a boy perched high up on a glowing street lamp.

The crowd's pent-up excitement exploded. They clapped, cheered, roared and whistled. Flags and handkerchiefs waved from tenement windows above. The grand farewell had begun.

First came the band. Bagpipes blared. Kilts flared in the breeze. Tubas and trombones blasted. Bass drums boomed and snares rat-a-tat-tatted.

Then followed the rest of the men, in rows four abreast, some singing songs of war as their trrrump-trrrump-trrrump bootsteps echoed off the grey granite walls. The bonnets on their heads swam along in formation like a shoal of exotic fish from the great North Sea.

Now and then, a young woman broke through the crowd barrier and rushed forward. She would throw her arms around a soldier's neck and kiss him, only to be hurled away by a hard-hearted sergeant. The memory of the bristle of her sweetheart's moustache on her cheek and whisky breath from his last drink at his home barracks were her prizes.

George Ramage was not expecting female attention, but he got it anyway. Marching on the edge of the procession, he found himself being handed presents from unknown women. He was already carrying a heavy backpack, a rifle and 120 rounds of ammunition – but since the presents were mostly cigarettes they were a welcome additional burden. Fags, he had heard, could be bartered for other goodies once they reached the front line.

Ramage was thirty-three years old. Before joining the army, he had been a teacher in Edinburgh. Some of the lads marching with him were almost young enough to be his pupils.

The soldiers completed their march from King Street Barracks to the station next to Union Square. The waiting locomotive impatiently belched out smoke and steam as men piled into the carriages. Ramage hauled himself aboard. The guard blew his whistle and the doors began to slam.

By 10pm the train was crawling out of Aberdeen and soon the wheels were clickety-clacking over the rail joints, as darkened fields sped past. Ramage saw himself and the others reflected in the carriage's ink-black windows. There were eighty-five men in his draft – off to join the 1st Battalion, Gordon Highlanders, as part of the British Expeditionary Force in France and Belgium. Some were excited first-time recruits, but others were wounded and unsmiling veterans returning to the firing line.

The veterans had been promised that the war – declared on 4 August 1914 – would be over by Christmas. Well, Christmas had been and gone and the German Empire which had advanced across Europe remained undefeated.

Ramage was one of those who had enlisted early in the new year, on 19 January 1915. He was ordered to Aberdeen, where his battalion was based, for training in preparation for deployment. It was now 13 April and his wartime adventure was about to begin.

By morning the train had crossed the Scottish border and was well into England. They arrived at Southampton docks at a quarter to four. The steamer was waiting. Up the gangway went Ramage and company, joining other drafts for the infantry, cavalry and engineers.

Ramage found a space on deck to sleep and the next morning woke to witness the vessel entering the mouth of the River Seine, having safely crossed the English Channel to France. Dozens of other steamers were sailing about alongside torpedo boats and minesweeping trawlers.

On the bank of the river stood the port city of Le Havre – its name French for 'The Harbour'. Near the water's edge was a hoarding that read 'God Bless You All'. A French soldier dressed in a blue coat and baggy red trousers waved a salute.

Further on, more well-wishers flocked to the banks. Behind them lay fields, beyond which were white cliffs with pretty chateaux perched on top. School bells rang out, rifles fired in the air and dogs barked in greeting. 'Heep Heep Hooray!' shouted a group of women, waving handkerchiefs and flags, their feet soaked by the wash as the troopship sped past. Ramage couldn't help waving back.

At lunchtime the vessel reached its destination, the city of Rouen. As the soldiers marched uphill to spend the night in a British camp, Ramage noticed that many of the locals here seemed gloomier, although some of the women perked up when they noticed the Scotsmen's kilts and bare legs.

The final stage of Ramage's journey to the front was by train. Tightly packed in a cushionless carriage, and with lumps in their throats, the men began to sing songs they'd learned at school. 'Me and my true love will never meet again, on the bonnie bonnie banks of Loch Lomond . . .'

To avoid becoming too homesick, they followed that with an upbeat ragtime jazz song, 'We are the Gordon swells boys, we are the Gordon swells!'

In the morning they made a few stops. Some were brief, just long enough for locals to pass bottles of wine through the carriage windows in exchange for tins of 'bully beef' – a type of tinned corned beef which was the mainstay of the soldiers' rations.

Other stops were longer. At Hazebrouck, a French town about ten miles from the Belgian border, Ramage washed under a water pipe used to fill the trains' steam engines. Then, while someone made tea, he and his friends watched transfixed as two military aeroplanes – still a dazzling new invention – shimmered in the sunshine overhead.

At last, just as the men were growing tired and argumentative from hours spent in the cramped carriage, the train made its final stop at Bailleul. They were now very close to the border with Belgium and the front line beyond. Bailleul's sleepy old streets, rudely awakened by war, were swarming with soldiers, horses and army motor vehicles. Ramage and the others marched through the town and began a six-mile hike north, to the billets – the place where they would sleep until sent to the trenches.

They rested en route in a ploughed field. It was here, while lying on the freshly turned soil, that Ramage heard the distant sound of man-made thunder for the first time. He jerked his head up to listen.

Boom . . . Boom . . . Boom . . . The guns of war. Suddenly the thought struck him that he might never see home again.

The billets were a welcome sight, wooden huts with corrugated-iron roofs sloping down to the ground. The soldiers had crossed the border into Belgium a couple of miles back, and were now in a place called La Clytte. The British field guns – huge, long-barrelled cannons – were located nearby. Every time they fired, the huts shook.

About four miles further on to the northeast was the city of Ypres – pronounced 'Eee-prey' – a major battle zone. The Gordon Highlanders were part of a line defending the land around Ypres. Their goal was to stop the Germans advancing west to the coast, beyond Ypres, and capturing the French port of Calais.

At night, while searchlight beams hunted for aircraft overhead, the giant field guns fired time after time on the enemy trenches. With each strike, broad flashes lit up the sky. To Ramage it looked as if the door of an immense iron furnace was being opened and shut. The flashes were accompanied by loud booms, like breakers hitting sea cliffs. The distant rifle and machine-gun fire echoed like rivets being hammered into a ship's hull.

By day, elderly local farm workers sowed seeds on the edge of the battlefield with gnarled hands, wiping sweat off their wrinkled faces as they went. Their home was a war zone, yet they tried to continue as if nothing had happened.

Ramage was kept busy being drilled, marched and inspected. The reality of what he had signed up for was becoming clearer as each day passed, and never more so than when he listened while an officer read out cases in which the death sentence had been passed on Tommies – the nickname for British soldiers – for disobeying orders.

This was no idle threat. One man had refused to go to the trenches with his platoon. So he was put in front of a firing squad and shot. Another deserted his post in the trenches – he too was shot. An officer in the firing line took cover without permission, and for this he was also shot.

At last it was time for Ramage's first stint in the battle trenches. At 7pm on Thursday 22 April, 1915, he and the rest of the men of No 16 Platoon, D Company, 1st Gordons, cleaned their huts and departed, carrying all their possessions in their backpacks and pouches. These included two days' rations of bully beef, biscuits, bread, cheese, sugar and tea. Not forgetting their 'smokes' – the Tommy word for cigarettes.

No halting. No speaking. No smoking. These were the orders as the men marched along in the gathering darkness, stray bullets whizzing past their ears. They passed ruined farmsteads, the remains of shattered trenches and skirted round the edges of huge craters left by exploding bombshells.

A bombshell – or 'shell' as they called them – typically contained a high-explosive that threw out hot chunks of jagged metal, called shrapnel, on impact. Walking past numerous roughly marked soldiers' graves, Ramage was in no doubt about the shells' destructive powers.

The artillery used in the First World War was the most powerful the world had seen. But nobody had yet devised a method for men to advance against such firepower without being slaughtered. So each side spent most of their time hiding in trenches to stay alive.

A star shell flared up just ahead. These shells were designed not to destroy, but to illuminate. The field was turned a vivid green. Objects stood out as though under a bright electric light. Ramage and the others crouched down, motionless. When the flare died down they slipped silently into their portion of the trench just as the company they were relieving slipped out.

'Fix bayonets!' someone shouted.

Just as they'd been trained to do, the men attached blades to the ends of their Lee Enfield rifles – ready to skewer a German should one jump into the trench unexpectedly. The German trench was only sixty metres away – about the width of a football pitch – in front of some woods.

Even closer to the Germans were men of the Royal Scots regiment. Their trenches were only thirty metres apart. The short stretch of ground in between – the length of a swimming pool – was referred to as No Man's Land.

Ramage looked around at his new accommodation. The trench was not actually dug into the ground as trenches usually were. It was mostly above ground, and more like a rampart – two walls made of piled-up sandbags filled with heavy clayey soil, with a channel or 'trench' in between. Inside the trench was a long bench for sitting on, or standing to watch German movements.

'We've been stuck in the same spot for months,' said a war-weary Tommy to Ramage as he packed up to go. 'I've never seen a German yet and never fired a shot.'

In fact, Ramage's section of the trench didn't shoot, for they would hit the Royal Scots if they did. Everyone else along the front seemed to fire bullets and bombs all night long. But neither side advanced an inch.

Night fell and rats scurried over resting bodies as the hours crawled by. Eventually the dawn began to break. The men took turns to keep watch using periscopes – long, tube-like devices containing mirrors and lenses that allowed the user to peep over the parapet while remaining hidden.

When Ramage looked out he noted three rows of 'knife-rests' – barbed-wire defences designed to entangle an advancing enemy and make him easy prey for British machine guns. Ramage also saw that any building not already flattened was a ruin, and that the bark of all the trees had been shredded by bullets and shrapnel.

A few metres in front of the trench a dead soldier lay on his back. His bloated corpse had apparently lain there since December. Nobody dared retrieve him or they would simply have been added to the body count.

Behind the trench were graves marked by crosses. The clayey soil around them was strewn with disused sandbags, empty food tins and other rubbish.

'Anyone got a wristwatch? Swap you anything you like,' said one Tommy.

'I see you've got a few packs of fags,' replied another. 'Give me the lot and my watch is yours.'

Apart from trading belongings or being on watch duty, pastimes included cooking, cleaning and searching for lice. An infestation of the tiny parasites was enough to drive a man mad scratching himself to pieces. Ramage thanked God he didn't have any – yet.

Relief from this hellish existence was a cup of tea. That is, if a tepid brew made from scummy, vermin-infested bubbling green water scooped from shell holes could be called 'tea'. Ramage, like many inexperienced Tommies, had drunk the clean water in his canteen too quickly. His rations were running out pretty quickly too.

Further relief came from letting off a few rounds of fire against the enemy. Ramage would poke his rifle through a 'keyhole' – a firing hole cut in an iron shield mounted on the sandbag parapet – and shoot at the Germans.

Days and nights passed. It began to rain and the clay turned to mud. Every remaining piece of unsoiled kit or uniform became clarty. All Ramage could do was to drag a waterproof sheet around his shoulders and wait for the rain to stop.

An empty ration tin filled with some kind of chemical liquid was hung up on a post along with a bag of cloth scraps. This was in case of a gas attack. If poisonous clouds were spotted blowing in their direction, the sentries would soak the cloths and give one to each man to put over his face.

The Germans must have been just as frustrated. Their snipers' bullets smashed the ends of the British periscopes and their shells whistled overhead. Every now and then one would land nearby, perhaps thirty metres off, tearing up the ground.

Neither side let up. But neither side made any real progress.

On his last night in the trench, Ramage was told he was going to become a grenadier – a bomb thrower. The training meant he would not have to return to his company's trenches for a while.

'It's not as cushy as it sounds,' said one Tommy as Ramage passed him. 'Two days ago there were three casualties among the bomb throwers in this battalion. And that was just when they were practising.'

Still, it felt good to have been chosen for the job. It was well known that trainee grenadiers were selected from men who were the best, bravest and steadiest in an emergency. He must have done well so far. A grenadier could do a lot of damage if he hit the target. But the role was very dangerous and the chances of being killed were increased.