DUNDEE DOCTORS IN WAR TIME

BY

Honorary Colonel, Medical Units of a T.A. Division
President, Forfarshire Medical Association

The title of this paper embraces three things in which I have for long been interested: my native town, my profession, and the army medical services. But I am not going to indulge in personal reminiscence, my

"plaintive numbers flow
For old unhappy far off things
And battles long ago."

In the earliest days of which we have records in Dundee, when the town was only about one mile long by about half a mile wide, one had usually not far to go to find the enemy; he might be on one’s doorstep or even in the house, and, if wounded, one called in one’s own doctor. The first record we have of such attention is in 1550, when Robert Pypar, a well-known barber-surgeon of the time, sued Gibbe Saidler “for the curing of Riche Saidler’s heid hurt be ynglismen” apparently in the capture of the town in 1547. The balance due was about 7s. 6d.

But by this time some attempt was being made to provide medical attention for Scottish troops. Comrie (1932) says that the first reference to military surgeons in Scotland is in the Register of the Privy Seal of Scotland of 1542, which notes disbursements to five surgeons on account of services to Mary of Guise, regent to Mary Queen of Scots, apparently in connection with military operations in the Borders that year. In 1560 a contingent which set out from Dundee under Provost Haliburton to help fight the French troops brought over by the Queen Regent was accompanied by local surgeons whose pay had been guaranteed by the Earl of Moray. In 1567, however, James Carrail, another Dundee barber-surgeon, asked testimony of the Magistrates that they had never been paid as promised for their “grite labours and costs upon curing and healing of Inglismen and Scottismen there hurt and wounded”; that is at the siege of Leith, where, for once, Scots and English were on the same side. I don’t know if they were ever paid.

Such references are very tantalizing in their brevity; one would like to know so much more about the tales they could tell. For instance, on 8th April, 1615, James Neill, surgeon, was made a burgess of Dundee “for his services in curing the inhabitants of the Burgh who were wounded in the service of the Country, and for his attendance upon the poor of the said Burgh, when requested by the Provost and Bailies.” This, says Millar (1887), is the earliest instance of any
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recognition of gratuitous medical services recorded in the civic annals. James does not appear anywhere else in the records of Dundee. No clue to his life and career has been found; nor is it easy to say in which war the casualties occurred. And so we must leave him.

Dundee’s greatest tragedy was the storm and sack of the town by General Monk in 1651. I cannot give any medical details of this tragic episode, but I may be permitted a digression from my strict theme in dealing with the Cromwellian war. Anna, wife of Sir James Halket, Bart., of Pitfarne in Fife, had an unusually high education for a woman of this time. The Duke of Gloucester and Princess Elizabeth, children of Charles I, were her pupils. Besides being deeply religious and a student of theology, she had from her early years studied “physick” that she might be able to help the poor, and she gained a considerable reputation. After the battle of Dunbar in 1650 she set out with her companions and necessary equipment to do what she could to help, and, coming to Kinross, “she and her women dressed about thrie score poor wounded soldiers” they found there. This is the earliest record I can find, at least as far as Scotland is concerned, of a women’s voluntary aid detachment, and deserves more recognition than it has gained.

Patrick Blair, M.D., F.R.S., was born in Dundee about 1666. Less than justice has been done to his memory. He published works on natural history, botany and medicine. He was the first to dissect an elephant in this country, he was the first to give in English a reasoned and convincing proof of sex in plants, and he was the first to describe the symptoms of pyloric stenosis. He started his professional life as a surgeon-apothecary and apparently served with the Army in the Low Countries, for in his writings he refers to surgical and medical cases he had dealt with there during the years 1695-1697. Soon after this he settled in Dundee and made his presence felt in his native town, but in 1715 he joined the Jacobite army, though he afterwards said he “was in no respect accessory to the late troubles, but happening to reside near the parts where the rebellion broke out, the gentry forced him to accompany the army as a medical attendant.” He missed the battle of Sheriffmuir, was made prisoner at the surrender at Preston, took part in the miserable trek in bleak November weather across the Midlands to London, where he found himself in Newgate, a condemned rebel. He had previously become a firm friend of Sir Hans Sloane and Petiver, the apothecary, and they did their best to get him a reprieve, but on the eve of his execution it had not arrived. Petiver visited him that evening and, writing to Sloane, tells how “the doctor sat pretty quietly till the clock struck nine, and then he got up and walked about the room; at ten he quickened his pace; and at twelve, no reprieve coming, he cried out ‘by my troth, this is carrying the jest too far.’” However, it arrived soon after and finally Blair was pardoned. He did not return to Dundee, but ended his days in Boston in Lincolnshire practising medicine and writing about botany.

As to the ’45, there is no record of a Dundee doctor serving on either side, but a near neighbour, Sir Stuart Thriepland of Fingask, half-way between Dundee and Perth, was an enthusiastic Jacobite and became principal medical
adviser to the Prince. He had taken his M.D. degree at Edinburgh in 1742 and became F.R.C.P.Ed. in 1744. He took part in the march to Derby, was present at Culloden and attended the Prince in the early part of his wanderings. He looked after Lochiel, who had been seriously wounded in the battle, in a cave on Ben Alder. His patient recovered. He joined Prince Charles in Paris, but returned to Scotland in 1747 under the Act of Indemnity, settled in Edinburgh, where he practised, and died in his ancestral home in 1805. His travelling medicine chest, usually known as “Prince Charlie's medicine chest,” is preserved in the Royal College of Physicians in Edinburgh.

The Napoleonic wars were fought by regular troops, but the volunteer movement was strong throughout the country, and these auxiliary troops not only acted in local defence against invasion but some had more onerous duties assigned to them. The 1st Regiment of Dundee Volunteers (Loyal Tay Fencibles) was sent to Ireland during the rebellion of 1798, and Dr. Alexander Bell as Surgeon and Lieutenant accompanied it. When the regiment was disbanded in 1802, Capt. Bell, as he then was, was presented with “an elegant silver cup by the members of his company as a token of their regard for him during the five years they were under his command.” He settled in Dundee, where for many years he had an “extensive and lucrative practice.”

At least two Dundee doctors went to the Crimean War. Dr. James A. Cowper, son of the parish minister of Glamis, was appointed first surgeon of the 7th Regiment of the Turkish Contingent. He wrote many interesting letters home which have been lost, but probably would have told us little of the campaign, for, an account of him says, “the warlike operations were carried on at places a distance from those at which Dr. Cowper was stationed, with the exception of one affair, in which a Russian captain was killed; so that he had not much opportunity of witnessing the sanguinary scenes with which this war abounded, or of exercising his professional skill for the relief of the wounded.” The Turkish Government, however, gave him a medal for his services, and in 1856 he settled in practice in Dundee and became its first “public officer of health.” He was also medical officer of the Highland Company of the Dundee Rifle Volunteer Corps, and died of typhus, a common fate of doctors in those days, in 1866, aged 40.

One could say much, on the other hand, of Dr. David Greig’s Crimean experiences. His letters home have been carefully preserved by his family and, thanks to the kindness of his daughter, Mrs. Annette Stewart of Glengarden, I have been privileged to see a typescript of them extending to some 200 quarto pages. David Greig, son of a Dundee doctor, was born in 1831 and qualified in Edinburgh. “My great object,” he says, “in joining the army was in these active times, in the first place to get surgical practice, to see the world, to get the eclat of being at the war, and to get a year or two’s recreation before settling in practice.” Before he set off in October, 1854, he received a charming letter from his old teacher, Sir James Simpson, wishing him God-speed. Simpson told him that Lord Blantyre wished him to take chloroform out. “They have not nearly enough there and I hope you will be able to show them how to use
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it properly.' He also asked Greig to write to him about his experiences, to take notes of the diseases as well as the wounds, as an excellent medico-chirurgical essay could be written on the campaign.

Greig sailed in the Vectis from Marseilles. "What a cargo we have, it consists of 18 doctors . . . 48 nurses . . . Protestant, Episcopalians and Catholics, Sisters of Mercy, nurses from the London Hospital, etc. I do pity them during the voyage, they are all so sick. When they get to Scutari or wherever they go, some ladies are among them—even ladies of fortune and title—they will I am sure soon tire of their good works." Greig did not then know that Florence Nightingale was amongst the "cargo," but, as he was posted to Scutari barracks on his arrival, he soon came to know her. One realizes how quickly she made her presence felt, for on 30th December, less than two months after they had landed, Greig wrote to his sister: "You asked me by the bye about Miss Nightingale—when on board the Vectis I did not know who or what she was, but since then we all know her very well. She is a very kind lady and what is more has £8,000 a year which we all joke about here. The nurses are all under her charge, sometimes we get a visit from her in the wards and if a nurse is required for a patient she sends one. At some parts of the hospital they attend every day and dress the patients, but to do that at all the hospitals would require 50 times the number. She keeps strict watch over them and they work very well, but I think the same could be done by the orderlies which we always have in our wards."

Greig was very jealous of the honour of the medical service, and later from Sebastopol he wrote to his sister, very angry with the writer of a letter to The Times about neglect of the wounded, in June, 1855. "He says he could not get drinking cups, water, food, splints, etc. Why? because he was an ass, and did not know where to get them as he should have done. I have never yet applied in vain for anything which would be of use to my patients even to calf's foot jelly, lemon jelly, soups, turtle soup or even champagne. Everything can be got if you go rightly about it."

He was very proud of one of his surgical experiences as he tells his father. He had been transferred to Kulalie in January, 1855, where he looked after Russian prisoners ("some are very badly wounded, more especially the Cossacks who were engaged in the cavalry charge at Balaclava and who have got some very ugly cuts especially about the back of the head") as well as English sick. The surgeon in charge asked his opinion of a man of the 30th Regiment who had been sent down from the Crimea with frost-bitten feet. "I told him he ought to amputate one of the feet at the ankle after Syme's method." (Syme had been another of Greig's teachers in Edinburgh.) "He said he would rather amputate below the knee as he was not acquainted with that operation, having been all his days at the Cape of Good Hope. I took him to the dead house and showed him how to do it. He said 'My fine fellow, it is a beautiful operation but I can't do it; if you like to take the risk and say it should be done, you must do it.' Just what I wanted. We had a consultation of all the staff and everyone spoke against it, but as I insisted on it the patient was taken from a fellow senior to me
in the service, put in one of my wards, the operation performed and I am glad
to say I have saved a nice young fellow's leg, besides getting a good deal of credit
from all my companions, and the result is all the bad cases are sent to me, which
is very good. The amount of practice I see here of all kinds is immense and I
hope may be of use to me in after life.”

Soon after this, in February, 1855, Greig developed what was evidently
typhoid fever and nearly died. He had already been pulling strings to get to the
Crimea, preferring as he said, “the hardships of the camp to the dangers of an
hospital,” and after his recovery, reached the British Base at Balaclava in April.
Here he received an “immediate” order attaching him to the 17th Regiment
before Sebastopol. “I knew what ‘immediate’ meant so I took my time and
yesterday forenoon I got my luggage upon one pony and myself upon another
and set off for camp.” His experiences of active service in the field are very like
those of more recent wars. He did his duty, not without its attendant difficulties
and dangers, and had narrow escapes. On one occasion he wrote: “When I
was buried by that round shot my only feeling was ‘well the day of judgment
can’t be much worse than this.’” On another occasion, doing duty in the
trenches, he wrote of a bombardment: “The first shot they fired came slap
thro’ an embrasure close to me, caught one poor fellow in the face, took his head
off, wounded another and dashed into a powder magazine close by sending the
stones flying in all directions. I attended to the wounded man as well as
1 I could
considering the state I was in. I then went to look at the one that had been
killed. The whole of his head had been knocked off except his right
whisker.”
The fears of the man could not abolish the wish to observe of the doctor!
“Shot and shell,” he wrote, “look very well at a distance but they are anything
but pleasant when they are flying about your head.” A sentiment with which
we can all agree. Crimean mud, according to Greig, was no different to that of
more recent wars, and the strange “uniforms” which appeared in the Eighth
Army in the desert were not really innovations; in the Crimea Greig’s normal
garb was just as much a departure from the standards of his day. He quotes a
French Order of the Day which appeared after there had been considerable
fighting for some rifle pits. The Allies had captured several, but the French
lost theirs again. The order went: “The English have taken their rifle pits.
When the English take rifle pits, they keep them. (Signed) CANROBERT.”

Lighter things occupied Greig’s pen as much as the more serious. Soldier
servants have changed little; good friends they can be, but they have their
foibles. When he was ill he had a servant from the 79th Highlanders. “He
often put me to sleep by talking of Scotland. He was rather religiously inclined
altho’ very fond of whisky when he could get it.” Greig and another medical
officer with whom he shared a tent in the Crimea came to a very sensible arrange-
ment. They each had a servant: “Neither of our servants are teetotallers, we
give them warning that they must never get drunk at once or we will immediately
have both flogged.” They could look after themselves well as soldiers have
always done. Greig wrote to his mother: “There is a large hole dug which is
our wine cellar which we always try to keep as respectable as possible. It is the
coolest place in our tent and cold drinks are everything. I know you are very anxious to know what we have in our wine cellar, are you not? Now confess and I will tell you. Oh, how miserably we poor fellows in the Crimea do live, fighting for an ungrateful country, just think what a miserable cellar we keep, it contains only Sherry, Marsala, Brandy, Whisky, Rum and home-brewed lemonade. No wonder we look thin!" His account of a dinner in the field with his Brigadier makes one's mouth water. He had hiccups all night after and evidently deserved it!

Routine duties took up part of his time, such as weekly inspections to see all men were clean; feet, legs, hands and arms were all looked at and if necessary the men had to strip. "If a man has dirty feet he gets extra drill, is sent to the river to wash them and if he is very bad he may even be flogged."

After Sebastopol was captured Greig was appointed in December, 1855, to one of the newly formed Pathological Boards, work which evidently suited him. He got the job, he considered, through Dr. Guthrie, for whom he had made a few preparations and written a paper on gunshot fractures of the femur. In March, 1856, he wrote that though his board had 27,000 men under its charge only 22 deaths had occurred during the previous month, and he thought it would be even less that month. "No one could wish the British Army in better condition. The French are however very sickly."

But now the war was over and in July Greig left for home and took up practice in Dundee in December, 1856. He kept up his military interest by becoming surgeon to the 1st Forfar Company of the Dundee Rifle Volunteers, and ran a busy practice, including several public appointments, till his death in 1890.

These glimpses of our predecessors show that our own experiences are not novel. They too, when danger threatened their country and homes, were ready to devote their services to the army, and in spite of recent discoveries an army doctor's duties and experiences, like the principles of war, do not change.

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Dundee Doctors in War Time

John Kinnear

*J R Army Med Corps* 1954 100: 141-146
doi: 10.1136/jramc-100-02-10

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