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Poems from the Trenches

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POEMS
FROM
THE TRENCHES

BY
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PREFACE

These poems, written by the author while in the training camps in England and in the Trenches, are a fitting tribute to the part Scotchmen, not only from the dear old Heather Hills, but from the four corners of the world, are playing in the titanic struggle to establish world democracy.

History repeats itself, and the valor and gallantry, together with the unselfish sacrifice of the sons of "Old Scotia," is again being recorded to be passed along to future generations.

Ever cheerful under the most adverse conditions, Scotchmen are always ready to appreciate the humorous as well as the serious side of life; there is a strain of both fittingly set forth in these verses.

Almost every phase of the British Tommies' life is touched upon. Hearing his country's call, Leaving the folks back home, Training in camp, and the horrors of actual modern warfare. The characteristic optimism and confidence of ultimate victory is clearly the uppermost thoughts of these Boys who so mildly put it down as simply "doing their bit."

Early in 1915, the author, Ernest Craigie Melville, who was a member of Clan Sutherland, O. S. C., gave up his business in Boston, Mass., and returned to his native Scotland, enlisted as a private in the Argyle and Sutherland Highlanders, went to France with his regiment, where he participated in the actual fighting. His study of conditions over there was the inspiration for these poems.

He was gazetted Second Lieutenant in 1917, subsequently being ordered to India with his old regiment, where he is now stationed.

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THE ARGYLLS

You can pick him out in the khaki throng,
By the jaunty way he steps along,
 Those boys of the braw Argylls;
His dress somehow looks a trifle cleaner,
The cut of his limbs just a wee bit leaner,
His eye has a look that's somewhat keener,
 Those boys of the braw Argylls.

In a lordly way he swings his kilt,
His voice has aye a laughing lilt,
 Those boys of the braw Argylls;
His friendships aye a wee bit truer,
The girls all say he's a dandy wooer,
When he drinks he can aye get a wee bit fouer,
 Those boys of the braw Argylls.

Of work he is ready to bear the brunt,
You will find him somewhere in the front,
 His face aye wreathed in smiles;
His step is firm and a trifle lighter,
He keeps his lips just a wee bit tighter,
He has proved himself a bonnie fighter,
 Those boys of the braw Argylls.

THE KILTIES

They are Highland men, from misty glen,
From islands of the sea ;
A martial host to prove the boast
That Scots were ever free.
Straight-limbed and clean, with eye that's
 keen,
Red-blood beneath their tan :
O! Glengarry and kilt and chin with a tilt
Are signs of a fighting man.

From the rugged north these lads came forth—
Sons of a fighting breed ;
Not theirs to crawl or funk the call
That came in hour of need.
Grim-jawed and lean and proud of mien,
You'll find them in the van,
For Glengarry and kilt and chin with a tilt
Are signs of a fighting man.

With a jaunty spring and kilts aswing,
And ribbons in the wind ;
Although they're gone they still march on
In hearts they left behind.
With fearless eye and head held high
They'll do the best they can,
For Glengarry and kilt and chin with a tilt
Are signs of a fighting man.

A PRAYER

I'm tired of the town with its ordered roads,
Of the cobbled streets and cramped abodes
 That cumber the city's sod;
Of the sordid struggle for fame and pelf,
Where it's little for other and most for self,
 And seldom a thought for God.

Grant soundness of limb and length of days,
To spend in the hills with their winding ways,
 Where clean winds blow from the sea;
A pittance enough for my daily bread,
The sky above, the heath for a bed —
 Lord, that were enough for me.

A TRIBUTE

Lt. W. L——, killed in action July, 1917.

Somewhere in France he fell,
Him, whom we loved so well,
Just how we cannot tell,
 But this I know —
'Twas with a dauntless eye,
Fearless and head held high
In the way all heroes die,
 Face to the foe.

Never himself he spared,
But with his men he dared,
All of their dangers shared,
 Leader and friend;
Unselfish, kind and brave,
For others his life he gave,
Now in a soldier's grave,
 Sleeps at the end.

Not his to funk or crawl,
When came his country's call,
Gladly he gave his all,
 Welcomed the chance.
Treasured his memory
All through the years shall be,
Ah, but the heart of me,
 Lies somewhere in France.

THE PRICE

I didn't stop to reason — came when I heard
the call,
Back to the land of my fathers, knew they
needed all;
Didn't stop to reason, although in a sort of way
I knew that war is a costly game, and steep
the price to pay.

Wearisome months of danger for the sake of
Right and the Truth,
The sacrifice of precious years from a swiftly
fleeting youth;
Giving up cherished ambitions on the eve of
being fulfilled;
Risking loss of a business that has taken the
years to build;
Cutting adrift from an anchorage — back
from the Empire's edge;
'Tis destiny that the young men pay to keep
the Empire's pledge.
All of these did I give up gladly — paid when
the bill came due,
But I hardly expected that part of the price
would be — YOU.

Back from the hell of the fighting over in
ravished France,

Spared — I can't quite figure it out,— by the
will of God, or chance.
Shattered a bit in health and limb, but other-
wise sound and sane,
Left, like many a better man, to begin all
over again.
With nothing of consolation but the thought of
a duty done,
To give heart for the years ahead and a fight
that's only begun.
They're urging me on, those old-time dreams
— urging to up and do ;
With grit maybe I can win them back — all of
them back but — YOU.

THE VAGABOND TRAIL

By hill and sea, where winds blow free,
I walk a vagrant trail.
And none have I for company
Except the men who fail;
The restless ones, the younger sons,
The Prodigal, the dud,
The man from jail, beyond the pale,
And those of gypsy blood.
The so-called scum from city slum,
The tramp, the pioneer;—
We mush together on the Trail,
And laugh at Life's veneer.

No more for us Convention's fuss;
No more the cramped abodes;
Or ordered beats, on city streets—
We walk the open roads.
And then at night, with stars a-light,
When winds blow fresh and clean,
By campfire gleam, we smoke and dream,
About the Might-Have-Been.
But heed we must, the Wanderlust,
All those who hear its call.
We'll jest with Fate until the Great
Adventure of them all.

THE PIONEERS

Ah, 'tis a glorious heritage you left us,—
You, dear kilted lads who are gone ;
For at sight of us French eyes glisten
And French lips say "Écossé très bon."
Full well they know the part you played
In many a fight from sea to Somme ;
Often outnumbered but never afraid—
"Écossé très courageux homme."

You didn't know much in their lingo line,
With your "bongswar, Madam," and "No
compree,"
But your constant grin and lifted chin,
And undaunted hearts were good to see.
They know we're sons of the selfsame breed,—
That we're kith and kin of those lads who
are gone ;
So it is up to us by word and deed
To play the game and carry on

MACONACHIE

It's a bit of all-right to be quit of the fight,
And back in Old Blighty once more;
With a wash and a scrub and decent cooked
grub —
That trench stuff was getting a bore.

The sheets are so white, the room is so bright,
The sky up above is so blue,
That sometimes it seems as if it were dreams,
Those terrible times I've been through.

Needless to state I have tales to relate —
Tales that are awful and queer.
But take it from me, how I won my V. C.
Is the queerest you ever did hear.

Twelve month to a day, I was over the way,
Just a-scrappin' to beat the band.
Twelve months for meat did they give us to eat
That stuff wot Maconachie canned.

I liked it at first, and then I just cussed —
It was comin' so often, you see.
'Ow would *you* feel if at ev'ry blamed meal
You got nowt but Maconachie?

One night I stretched out in my little dugout
To get a few hours' repose.
Dog-weary and sore I lay down on the floor
Too tired to take off me clo'es.

I soon fell asleep, in that dugout so deep,
Forgot where I was, so it seems.
In a moment or two I was sure passing thru
The grandest of grand little dreams.

I recollect well bein' hit by a shell
That burst with a terrible roar,
And a sulphurous smell that blew me to—well,
There's no need to say any more.

But I landed there quick, was met by old Nick,
Who was really exceedingly kind.
Says the Old Boy to me, "Will you join us
at tea?"
Says I, "Thankye, sure I don't mind."

So without more ado I went with his crew,
They gave me the choicest of seats.
With a wave of his hand, Nick gave the com-
mand
To hurry along with the eats.

Says I to mysel', "Old Scout, you've done well,
This sure is a bit of allright."
But just then and there I jumped from my
chair,
For I saw a most horrible sight.

Those servants of sin all came troopin' in,
And each of them leerin' at me.
And on every tray I saw that there lay
Nowt but this of Maconachie!!

Well that was enough—just the sight of the
stuff,
I waited to see nothing more.
But I up with a yell, that startled all Hell,
And I made for the open door.

I flew up some stairs that led out somewheres,
It was blacker than inky smoke.
I jumped o'er a wall—and the shock of the fall
Gave me a jolt—and I woke.

And there then was I, out under the sky,
Just a-runnin' to beat the band,
Through barbed wire and trench and the awful
stench
That is known as "No-Man's-Land."

Before I could stop, I was right on the top
Of a crouchin' German patrol,
That was out that night and hidden from sight
Down in a big shell-hole.

At sight of me they were scared as could be,
I guess they thought I was mad,
For they down on their knees, and shouted
"Oh please,
Have mercy on us, Kamerad."

Well wot could I do but see the game through?
I took all their pistols and guns,
Then makin' signs, I showed them our lines,
And marched in those five little Huns.

When our Colonel saw me, he was pleased as
could be,
His face beamed all over with joy.
Says he, "Every gent in this old regiment
Is proud of you, tonight, my boy."

"You sure have got sand, here give me your
hand,"
He shook it with manifest glee.
"Ne'er another such stunt has been done at
the front,
I'll see that you get the V. C.

Of course I said nowt how it all come about,
(The wise owl has nothin' on me).
But as long as I live, the credit I'll give
To old Mister Maconachie.

FATIGUES

There's a certain hour of evening that I have
 come to dread,
It is the hour when decent folks are thinkin'
 of their bed ;
But I'm sure to be goin' with a working-gang
 instead,
 A-slitherin' through the mud and rain.
So we trudge along a labyrinth of never-endin'
 trench,
With heavies burstin' overhead (Lor' they do
 make a stench.
Say, this wouldn't be a bad place to come
 walkin' with a wench—
 It looks just like a bloomin' country lane).

It isn't always fightin'—this holdin' of the line,
For we spend a lot of labor haulin' sandbags
 out a mine—
By the number that comes up you'd think
 they'd reached the Rhine,
 (Ain't this bloomin' war never goin' to end?)
We heave them o'er the parapet, Lor' how
 those boys can swear,
When Fritz sends o'er a whizbang or a nasty
 flick'ring glare,
Or gets his ticker goin'—we sure do get a
 scare,

When first I joined the army I thought 'twould
be sublime
To be fightin' for my country in France's
sunny clime,
But instead I am workin' for the R. E.'s half
the time,
Like any bloomin' navvy with a spade.
We do all the work it seems, the R. E.'s get
the pay,
They get three shillin's and us—a measly bob
a day,
Lor' in the British army don't they have a
funny way,—
Oh, the miles and miles of trenches that
I've made.

But while we're here we plug away and do our
very best;
The thing that keeps us goin' is the rumor
of a rest—
Alas! that now has got to be an ancient sort
of jest.

(Even the grim god of war has got to have
his fun.)

It's a long, long lane, you know, that has no
end in sight,
And we'll come marchin' homeward some
morning's dawning light;
So hustle, boys, get busy, and work with all
your might,
Every little bit helps to down the Hun.

A LIMIT GAME

Are you dreaming the long, long dreams of
Youth, hoping to make a name?
Are you trying to win a woman's love? Are
you after wealth or fame?
Would you build your house on the boulevard,
sit in the halls of State,
Or quest in the realms of science and art and
win a place with the Great?
Whatever it is you're out to win, no matter,
it's all the same,
Don't play the part of a piker, pard, and make
it a limit game.

Don't want to show how much you care, so
your feelings you try to hide?
Holding out a bit maybe, for the sake of a
foolish pride?
Are you stonewalling at the wicket—afraid
you'll be bowled or caught?
It's the man who takes a chance on the ball
that flogs them over the lot.
Are you tackling your man half-heartedly,
fearing a kick or fall?
Go into the game for all your worth, or don't
go in at all.

Are you playing a limit game or playing for
all you've got?

Have you only a little at stake, or is your all
in the pot?

He who ventures a little in life only a little
gets.

I know, for I played that sort of game and it
only brought regrets.

Never won much, but I might have won more
by the other way.

If I lost, knowing I might have won had the
limit been away.

For fortune favors the brave, you know, likes
ever a reckless sport ;

She smiles on the man who takes the risks,
and laughs at the other sort.

Has never a use for the cautious, the timid or
shrivel-souled,

But the chosen ones she makes her sons are
the Devil-may-care and Bold.

So play as men of red-blood play. Let the
craven laugh or scoff,

Fourflush in the game for all you've got, and
play with the limit off.

IN CAMP

Dear old draughty wooden hut that is Number 42,

There's not another like you if I search the whole camp thru;

Your walls are full of crannies and your roof leaks like a sieve

You may be dinky-looking, but an awful place to live.

The rain comes thru in torrents, a draught beneath the door,

And I rise in the mornings early with body aching and sore.

Still I shall hate to leave you for the sake of those splendid nights

When the long, hard day is over and Sergeant has douzed the lights,

And we lie on those beds of straw that unfortunate Tommies get,

And jestingly jolly each other as we smoke a last cig'rette;

The hut rings with our laughter as each man spins a yarn;

Of the long hard fight ahead, well, no one gives a darn.

Or somebody sings a solo — one of the heart-gripping kind,

While each of us thinks of his ain folks and
the girl he left behind.

I've a permanent dose of rheumatics, so I'll
long remember you,

Dear old draughty wooden hut that is Num-
ber 42.

FOR LUCK

“Parcels up,” the orderly cried,
And we crowded round to see.
He gave them out to the joyous-eyed,
But never a one for me.

So I turned away a trifle sad,
When along came Will McCue.
“Never you mind,” he said, “my lad,
For I’ve got enough for two.”

As he opened up that box of luck
I noticed his eyes a-swim.
A wee white sprig o’ heather for luck
She had put on the top for him.

And Will I saw he swallowed hard;
I had a lump in my throat.
“It stands for a woman’s prayer, old pard,”
And he fastened it to his coat

But scarcely had the words been said,
And hardly the action done,
When a sniper got him through the head,
(Cursed be that son-of-a-gun).

So we buried him over the top at night,
Deep down in the Flanders muck,
And wrapped with him in his ground sheet
tight
Was the sprig o’ heather— for luck.

CALL OF THE DEAD

Canna ye see them yet? — those laddies who
marched away
With pipers playing brawly and kilts and rib-
bons gay,
With their upturned sunny faces, their laugh-
ter and their fun?
To think, O, God, 'twere mine to see them
falling one by one!
But never a one with faltering step — stoutly
and unafraid,
They tackled the tasks that came their way;
paid — to the limit paid.

Dinna ye hear them calling above the
bullet's whine?
List, and ye'll hear them calling, those com-
rade dead of mine.
Still are they carrying on, with the light of
faith in their eyes,
With laughter and sun in their hearts to the
heights of Paradise.
There at the hands of a kindly God I know
that all is well
With the lads who quested to war, and joked
when they found its hell.

Here at my post alone, where the sky is flam-
ing red,
I vision them — I hear them call, that host
of comrade dead.
It's gripping me, and haunting me, aye by this
thought obsessed,
That I want to go now, with those who were
bravest and best.
Now — when the road to the heavenly heights
is thronged with soldier young,
Rather than wait for a tardy fate, and pass
alone and unsung.

HUMOUR

The machine guns they are spitting, the big
'uns roar and bark,
The Verey lights, like magic stars, are dancing
in the dark,
And shrapnell shells are bursting overhead.
A score of weary Highlanders, whose jaws are
grim and set,
Are crouching 'neath the cover of a crumbling
parapet;
Around them lie the dying and the dead.

Alone of all that company that started out
with pride,
Had crossed the dreaded "No-Man's-Land"
and reached the other side,
And then we knew the sacrifice was vain.
The wily Hun had dropped a barrage of cur-
tain fire,
There was nothing left for us to do but wait
the word — "Retire" —
Go back across that hellish stretch again.

I was thinking of a girl, who is all my heart's
desire,
Of the old folks sitting then beside a cosy
kitchen fire,
In a cottage in that grey town by the sea.

I was thinking of my chum lying back there
stiff and dead,
Who'd often wished a "blighty," but got
"vapor" instead,
And fervently was wishing I were he.

Then I heard the sound of laughter come from
Jock McGee,
Who is bomber in my section and was lying
close to me ;

Just then it sounded odd and mighty queer.
"I'm thinkin' o' ma mither, back yonder in her
cot,"

He explained — "and the funny piece of advice
that I got
When I left to do ma wee bit over here"

"When you get over yonder amid the shot
and shell,

Oh, Jock, be sure and see *and aye tak' care o'
yersel'.*"

"I remember them's the very words she
spoke."

He pointed to the shrapnel that was flying
, all around,

To our crumbling parapet nearly levelled to
the ground,

"Say, Sergeant, don't you see the bloomin'
joke?"

THE PUZZLE

Billy and I, we enlisted both in the same Scot-
tish town,

Joined the same battalion and were sent to
the same platoon.

Had never met before, but thrown together
by chance ;

We became the best of pals and drifted to-
gether to France.

Billy was only a youngster — just a rookie
fresh from school ;

Put his books away when he heard the call.
I'm — well, just a fool.

Life, with the years ahead was his, with every
promise of fame ;

Mine is a record of failure with none but my-
self to blame.

He was a mother's pride and joy — sunny-
eyed, straight and clean ;

I claim kin to none on earth ; been all I
shouldn't have been.

Billy, he was keen and bright, full of the zest
of life ;

I've played a losing game with Fate — just
about sick of the strife.

I have roamed to ends of earth at the lure of
a vagrant call ;

Have seen the world and am satisfied. He —
well hardly at all.

I've had my chance — didn't take it; didn't
care if I passed away.

But Billy was young and ambitious. Billy
wanted to stay.

Well, here I lie in hospital, where everything's
clean and bright;

The doctor thinks in a week or two that I'll
be quite alright.

But poor little Billy I left in France 'neath a
wooden cross.

('Twas just like taking the gold away and
sending back the dross.)

Do things happen in any old way — is every-
thing left to chance?

Is this talk of Destiny and God only a bit of
Romance?

Then why was Billy taken and me left here
to rant?

I don't understand. Have tried to figure it out
— but I can't.

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