

That Vanished World

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These short biographies represent a very superficial study of the Taynuilt men and women who have given their lives in the cause of our freedom. It would need a lifetime's research to tell even a part of their story. (See Bookworm on page 41; this essay forms the introduction to John Macfarlane's war memorial book - Ed.) One cannot, however, follow the brief path of each life without being filled with images of that vanished world which was Taynuilt: a world changed forever by the experiences of two world wars.

To a certain extent we see a sunlit world. It is rural and sure; secure with community; soft with the sounds of Gaelic, enclosed, comfortable. It is filled with village characters and families ancient in the place. There is a sense of continuity and, underneath it all, a deep and touching simple faith. And, always, there is the land....

In the land, salmon run; rivers and streamlets are stippled with trout. Deer are taken from corrie and fish from pool.

Shepherds walk the hill with crook and dog. The land is a crisscross of lazybeds manured with seaweed and dug with spade. Some fields are big enough to take a ploughshare drawn by patient horses at ease with plough or cart. Far off, there is the sound of hammer on anvil.

In the hills, men cut peats and eat at midday around little gorse-wood fires where strong tea is on the brew. Women come with wicker baskets filled with oatcakes and crowdie cheese, floury scones and bramble jelly, dark as wine.

Harvest is a time of sharing work. Crofters mow immaculate fields with scythe or horse-drawn reaper. Young men come to cut and coil, to toss and turn sweet hay, to build the egg shaped stacks. Children go barefoot to the sneezy, dusty tramping of the hay in the byres.

Pleasures are simple: Summer dances last till the cool of dawn and the long walk back home for milking time; Winter is a season for visiting, for home-made music, songs by lamplight, or tales told round fragrant fires of peat. Weddings are unpretentious; simple homely fare, whisky, ale and dancing in the Village Hall to pipe or fiddle, "box" and drum.

Yes there is poverty and incurable disease, childhood deaths and all the sorrows of life; but even in 1914 it is a sheltered world, confident, calm, assured and at peace within itself.

And then comes the War and the pain of goodbyes as doors slam, trains move off, shrouded in hissing steam, and a last wave at Taynuilt Station is the lingering memory.

Young men, for whom a trip to Oban Games was a novelty, go off to war in Gallipoli, Salonika and the bloodstained fields of Flanders. The clean quiet air of Loch Etive gives way the stench of the trenches, the noise and violence of the battlefield, the lice and the mosquitoes. In the Second World War they are in action in Burma and New Guinea. They suffer the long slog to Dunkirk and Anzio. They face death in the flack-filled air over Cologne and stop Rommel in his tracks in the deserts of North Africa. Confronting the enemy in both wars, they find discipline, comradeship and loyalty, courage and determination, steadfastness and faith among appalling sites and sounds. People at home face rationing, restrictions and, sometimes, enemy action. There is worry and quiet weeping and, for many families, relief at safe return.

But the old Taynuilt is gone forever.

