

Epilogue and Review of the Diary

Time. One evening late in September 1972.

Scene. A little house in a cul-de-sac road in Wolverhampton. All the houses have here a little flowered garden, front and rear. A quiet suburb.

Personae. Old Mackay, white-haired, age 76+, and with a bit of a limp. Margaret Mackay, his wife, age 70+, reading, listening to the Third Programme, tating an edging for her nightie, sometimes asking, sometimes answering, a question.

Action (Not much). Old Mackay has just finished typing a copy of his War I Diary for each of his four children. This is the first time he has read right through his Diary since 1919. He rises from the table, paces round his lounge which he prefers to his study, and begins to ponder on its contents. With the reading, many unrecorded events, long forgotten, come flooding back to his memory. Old Mackay of 1972 seems quite a different individual from that Young Mackay of 1916-1918. Prudence reminds him that Age should not be too critical of Youth. Yet he feels it is up to him to express his opinion, gently, about the diary. He sees a compromise, a via media. He will review the book as an entire stranger. His name will be "Senex".

He puts the proposition to Margaret, who has not read the Diary, and who does not deal in fantasies anyway. She agrees that it would be quite unusual for a diarist to have the first review of his work take place 53 years after it was written, and adds, that it would be unprecedented for the Reviewer to be the Diarist himself!

Thus encouraged by the uniqueness of the opportunity Old Mackay sits down again at the table. This time he takes his pen and slowly, proceeds to write, frequently stroking out what he has just written, and substituting some fresh word or phrase. This goes on for a long time. Whiles he rises to pace the room; whiles he scratches his head, and while he helps himself to a small whisky.

At length he rises, saying "it isn't good enough, but it's the best I can do. I'll type it out tomorrow, and correct the mistakes as I go along".

Exeunt. both!

Act 2.

Scene and Personae as above. Time is seven nights later. Senex has just completed the typing out of his review of the young man's diary. He has arranged for it to be attached thereunto.

Here Old Mackay rises, thanks God quietly for his present comforts, sighs, pours out a whisky for Margaret and a double for himself, and silently, reverently, drinks to the memory of his old comrades in the 11th and 1st/8th Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders.

Exeunt. Both.

The Diary of 2nd. Lieutenant R.L. Mackay in War I. 79 pages!

Reviewed by "Senex". September 1972.

This short diary is the product of an immature mind - *mens immatura in corpore sano* - yet it is typical and expressive of the times in which the Diarist lived. But unlike the private journals of today, there is no mention of sex, no sign of an agonised social conscience, no intense appreciation of the war horrors which sometimes surrounded him, no evidence of a philosophy of life or of death. The question arises as to whether he was well educated by today's standards! As a volunteer soldier he fully believed in the justice of his country's cause, and that belief was adequate and clear enough for him, yet in times of inactivity he must have had other thoughts, but nowhere does he give expression to them.

Thus, self-assured, problem-free, apparently heart-free, he becomes wrapped up in his own minor military activities and in those of his fellow officers and men. World shaking events, great defeats and victories elsewhere, did not greatly concern him. Day by day he devoted himself to his varying jobs, as signalling officer, assistant adjutant, or platoon officer, and to the factors influencing these - trench tours, finding the way "there and back", pre-battle and post-battle conferences, training, shelling and machine gun fire, and the ever present mud. When out of the line in reserve areas he became bored at times and rode either on cycle or horseback around the countryside with his officer friends looking for an inn or estaminet where a good dinner might be obtained, while when the weather was bad he sat in his billet or lay in his tent reading poetry or "The Browning Love Letters". An odd soldier indeed!

Some of his judgments are open to question. He is harsh on the staff, not realising that Brigade, Division, Corps and G.H.Q. were all harassed by the changing political situation of the day and the hour, and suffered as his unit did from cancellations, alterations and delayed battle plans. Mackay's style of writing is somewhat telegraphic. There is no picturesqueness in his phrases, no profundity in his ideas - and these seem few enough. We note an absence of self-analysis which would be unusual today. His language is that of the youth of his time, of his class and of his junior rank, not far removed from that of the schoolboy. In choice of oaths and swear words he is conservative, using "damn" sometimes, and "bloody" rarely, which is strange, considering the wealth of these available in the English language, and the provocations of his life at this time. We note his playful exaggerations now and then, e.g. when he complains of the amount of correspondence passing daily through his hands when acting as adjutant, and we hope he has not exaggerated about other matters in his diary!

Scottish parochialism shows itself in an inborn loyalty to his Highland Battalion. Indeed, as the war continues the battalion becomes a second home to him. Twice he frustrates attempts to detach himself from it. Sent to hospital with trench fever (a louse-borne disease) he silently discharges himself to convalesce with his battalion then in the front line. Sure evidence of a kink somewhere! And when on leave in Scotland or on some special course he keeps on wondering how his friends are faring, and who will be missing when he returns.

Had Young Mackay no sense of the Dramatic? His battalion had lost nearly all its pipers in the Battle of Loos in September 1915. Thereafter, pipers, being almost irreplaceable, were never sent into battle again, or allowed near the front line in trench warfare. But in September 1918 the battalion was back again at the old Loos battlefield where so many had fallen before. The air was electric with rumours of a possible German retreat. And the Pipe Band with its old Pipe-Major, reinforced by new young pipers, was allowed to march and play the old Highland war tunes, up and down, along the Loos-Hulluch Road. A beautiful Autumn evening, clear skies, the old battlefield lit by the westering sun, only scanty shelling and that mainly by our own guns, and the music, shrill, loud and long, coming over to the men in their trenches. Did the spirits of the dead of 1915 stir as they heard it? Mackay never mentions this incident!

This young chap was not a fighting man by nature. He never saw the whites of his enemy's eyes, although for over two years he lived and did his stint of work in the line. The Western Front was, by and large, not a war between individuals. Bayonet work was somewhat rare. The enemy was impersonal, the combination of shelling, devastating machine gun fire, and mud. Mackay acknowledges his debt to the Soldier poets, especially Rupert Brooke and Julian Grenfell. The latter's "Into Battle" was always an inspiration. Shakespeare's curious lines - "The living and the dead are but as pictures. 'Tis the eye of childhood fears a painted devil" ran through his thoughts on many a day. Were there no episodes of forlorn hopes or of reckless romanticism in his military life? He knew the sober elation of mere survival after the massacres at Ypres in 1917, and the greater elation of the controlled retreat in March 1918.

By April 1918 the absolute dourness of war was beginning to wear off; Boche was aware he was about to lose. By the time of Billie Irvine's raid a sense of exultation was spreading through the battalion, and in this Mackay shared fully. His lonely patrol with Corporal Landridge later gave him a deep thrill, although one might not guess at it from his story. Like Life itself, the Diary is a bit lopsided. It may give the impression that nearly all the time he was in France the writer was "under fire". This is due to the fact that he usually did not write up his diary when he was in the back areas. We must be grateful for that! He was no philosopher there. Only action appears to have alerted him in those days. From the day he joined his battalion in France at Martinpuich in Sept. 1916 until the Armistice on November 11th, 1918, Mackay kept a note of the names of the officers posted to the unit. There were 169 so posted, and of these 36 were killed or died. Most of the remainder were wounded. The normal establishment for a battalion in those days was about 22 - 24 officers. This battalion therefore renewed its whole officer strength some seven times in that period.

Well, it is not an outstanding diary, sometimes even a modest one. Nor are his experiences as an infantry officer exceptionable - except that they happened to him! We do not recommend publication. It should go into the family deed box. Perhaps one of Mackay's grandchildren will submit it to psychoanalysis! None the less, I'm glad to have had the opportunity of reviewing this 53 year old diary, and seeing what that young chap was like!

Senex.