

Just over 100 years ago

On 24th May 1915 George Ness Keay wrote to his former landlady in Canada:

'Dear Mrs Fyles

Received your welcome letter some time ago, and was going to answer it before now, but did not have the time. Now I have lots of time to write, for a few weeks anyway. You will see by the address I am in hospital, and in Dear Old England at that.

Well, I got wounded in the big battle around Ypres; it was shrapnel; two wounds on the right side and one on the right hand, but my hand is alright again, as it was only a slight cut. My side is getting on first rate too. I had a good-sized piece of shrapnel taken out of it: also some coal and pieces of my serge overcoat. It was the belt of the equipment that saved me from turning my toes up. Tomorrow the doctor is going to put the X-ray on me to see if there is any more shrapnel left in.

Oh, my, but I was lucky to get out of it with a wound, for I don't think there is many of my battalion left: in fact I don't think there is many Canadians left: but one thing, they saved the day.

The poisonous [gases] were very bad too: I got just a little of it and it made me very sick, and my eyes were sore for a few days. Well I don't like writing about what I have seen of it, for it was awful. It's not war – Just manslaughter.

I'll wait till I come home: then I can talk better than I can write. It's a pleasure to be in the hospital here. The people are very kind to us. On visiting days they come in with fruits, candies, cigarettes, etc., and they will get us anything we are in need of. As soon as we are able to get out people come and take us out for a motor ride. I'll close now, but will write soon in a few days. Hoping this finds you all well, as this letter leaves me getting along fine. Getting five meals a day; some treat after coming from the trenches.

Yours sincerely'

George Ness Keay was a Perthshire man, born in Harrietfield, Logiealmond, on August 21st 1890. He had an unusual history though many elements of it were not uncommon; his father died young leaving his mother with small children; his family emigrated to Canada, the most common destination for people from this area; he volunteered in the early days of the First World War and saw action in France.

George came from a family of masons who were responsible for many of the buildings in Harrietfield and the surrounding area. His great grandfather, Peter Keay, had bought one of the original plots when this small planned village was first laid out in the 1820s (Plot 7 at the east end of the middle block of the front row of houses). George's father and grandfather grew up on one of the two cottages built there with relatives next door. His father, Andrew Keay, followed in the family business as a journeyman mason.

In 1886 Andrew Keay married Margaret Ness who had been working as a housekeeper at Bridgend of Ardittie (marriage certificate) They moved into Stormont House at the east end of the village where they had two rooms. This two-storey house had belonged to Logiealmond Estate from its early days (Plot 9), and at times housed the manager of the quarry and at others estate and quarry workers and their families.

Andrew and Margaret, known as Maggie, had five children; William, Andrew, George, Rachel and Peter. Andrew Keay died of phthisis or tuberculosis in September 1895 aged 39, which his death certificate records he had had for four years. This was a much more common disease and cause of death at that time than today. Maggie was 30 and was left with five small children.

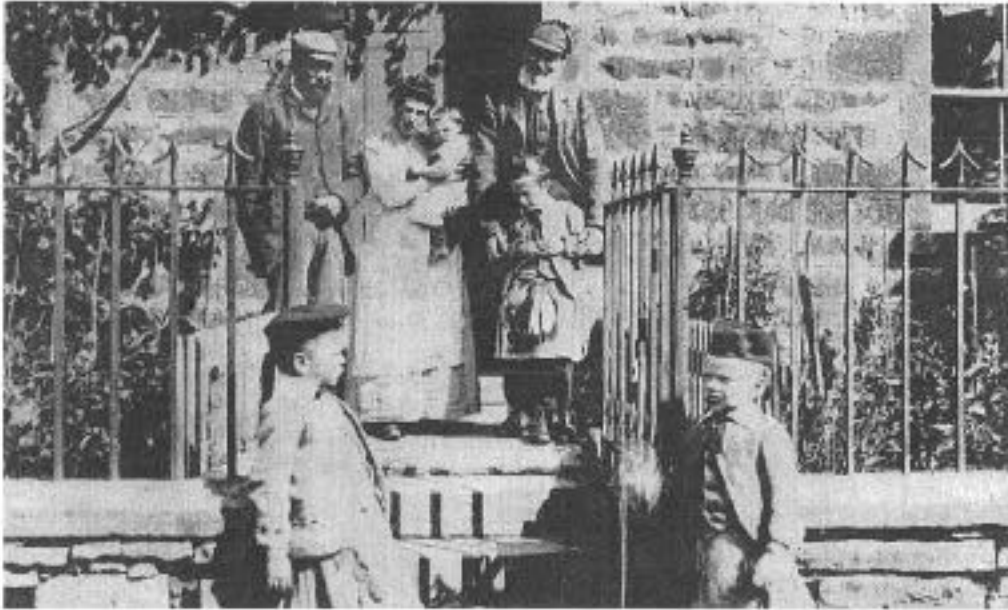
She stayed on in the house holding the lease in her own name for three years, but in 1899 she married one of the other tenants in the house, a slate quarrier called Donald Currie, aged 30. He came from Argyll and like many of those who worked at the quarry spoke Gaelic as well as English. They had three rooms but one was for the three quarriers who boarded with them. It was a very full house with a total of 21 occupants, as each of the other three rooms was

home to a slate labourer with his family. George was 5 when his father died, and 9 when his mother remarried.

The Keay Family outside Stormont House, Harrietfield.

About 1894

Back left to right; Andrew Keay, Margaret Ness Keay with Rachel, unidentified man and Andrew. Front; William and George – all looking very smart



About 1897

Margaret Ness Keay and, left to right, William, George, Rachael, Peter and Andrew



By 1909 the family had emigrated to Canada - George was 17. In 1906 Donald Currie sailed to Quebec on the SS Mongolian with the destination of Winnipeg, probably to check out the possibilities for the family. In 1907 William the oldest of the boys sailed on SS Lake Manitoba giving his intended destination as Vancouver, British Columbia. Donald and the rest of the family followed the next year on the SS Athenian destined for Redvers, Saskatchewan.

Andrew and Maggie's descendants have traced their family history and the rest of this account is drawn from their research. Stormont House in Harrietfield has remained important to them, and John Keay, William's grandson, and his family rented it for a holiday in 2005. They gave us a copy of their report on the life of George Ness Keay.

Maggie and the children obtained land and settled near Nottingham in Saskatchewan, but the Keay family have no knowledge of Donald Currie. It seems most likely that he had died and Maggie reverted to the surname of her children.

George soon moved on and found work in Cranbrook, British Columbia. The town was at the pass through the Rockies Mountains used by the Canadian Pacific Railway and he worked as a fireman on the trains.

Like many young men he volunteered at the beginning of the First World War. Aged 24 he joined the First Cranbrook Volunteers. They were sent to Quebec and he was drafted into the 13th Royal Highlanders of Canada. After training in Canada, and promotion to Lance Corporal, his battalion arrived in England and was sent to train on Salisbury Plain.

The 13th Highlanders of Canada were in France and on the front line at the Battle of Ypres on 22nd April 2015. Many died of chlorine gas that day and George 'got just a little of it'. The next day he was seriously injured by shrapnel, and was transferred to a hospital in Tunbridge Wells where he wrote the letter at the start of this account to his former landlady in Cranbrook, British Columbia.

That summer he had some leave in Britain and returned to Harrietfield for a visit to his remaining relatives. A family photo shows him in uniform with his cousin Cath McAra in the front garden of her house, which was next door to his father's childhood home.

George with his cousin Cath McAra, Harrietfield, summer 1915



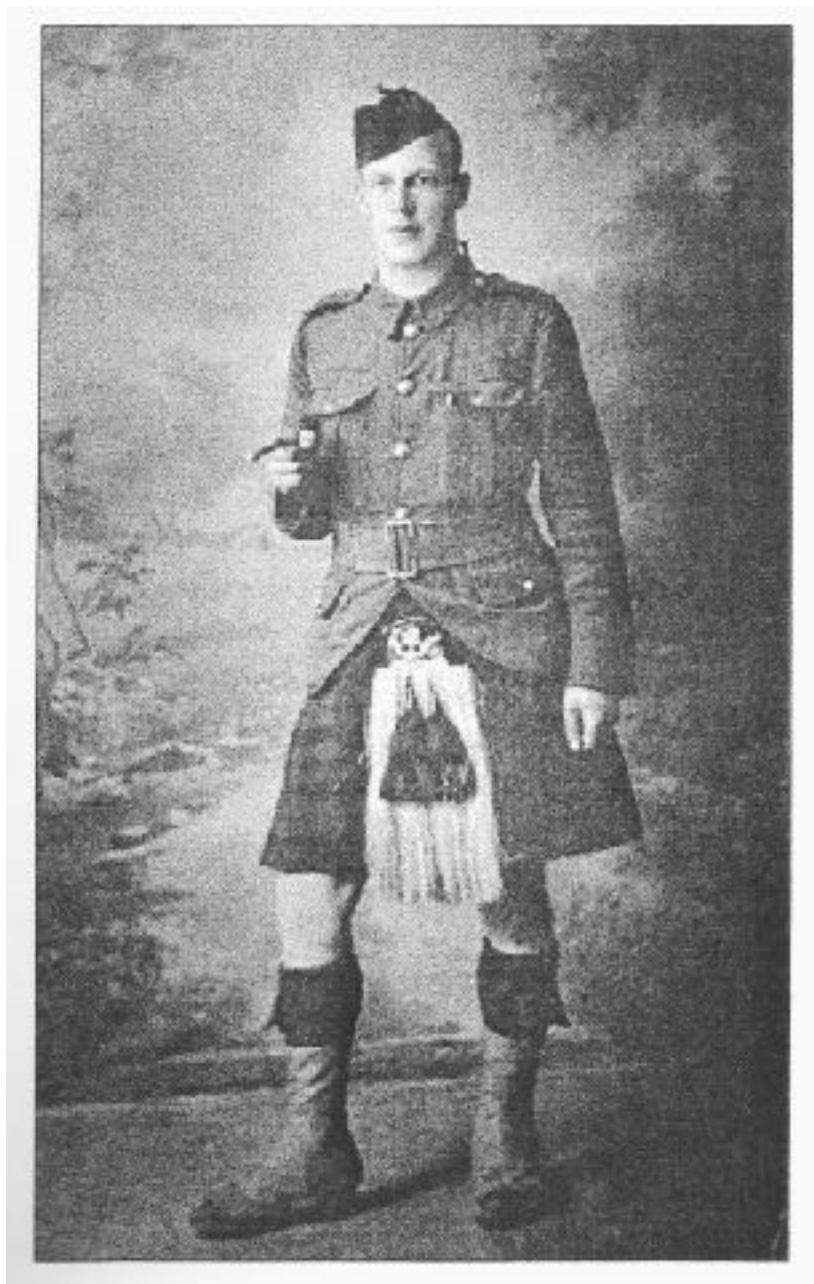
George's health remained poor and he suffered 'flu, diphtheria, and scarlet fever as well the effect of the gas on his breathing and stamina. But he returned to the Royal Canadian Highlanders of Canada and, with many others, he was sent back to the front in France for the battle of the Somme. In the attempt to take the German's Regina Trench on 8th October 1916 he was killed; declared missing, presumed dead. The Somme offensive lasted six months and cost the Canadians 24,029 men dead and wounded, and the allies more than 620,000.

George Keay is remembered on the War Memorial at the west end of Harrietfield, 'Canadian Contingent, L.Cpl. Geo. Keay'; on the memorial in Cranbrook, British Columbia; and on the Vimy Memorial in France to those killed in the First World War with no known grave.

With thanks to the descendants of the Keays in Scotland and Canada

This is an edited version of an article printed in the newsletter of the West Stormont Historical Society, July 2016

George Ness Keay 1890 - 2016



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The War Memorial in Harrietfield

