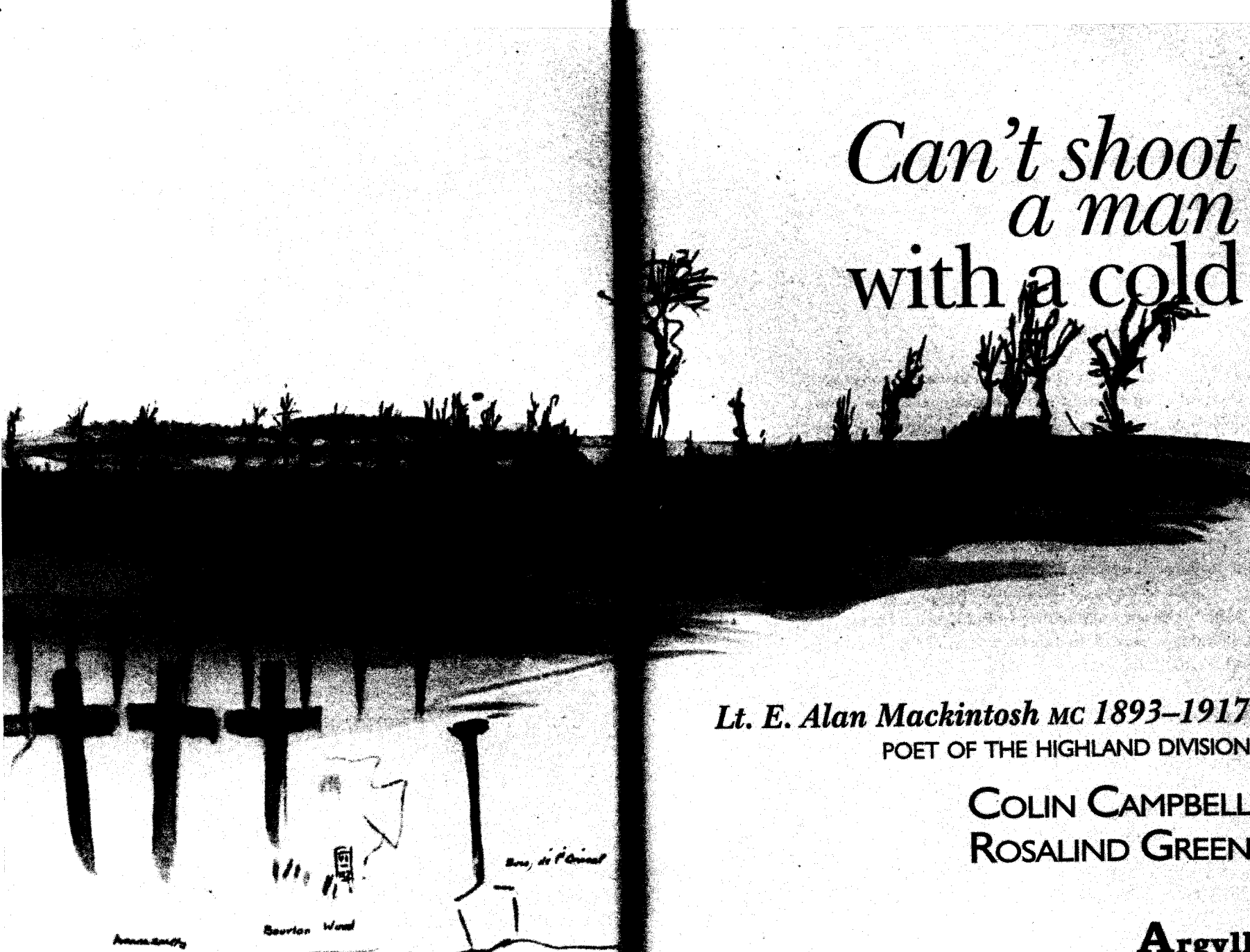


*Can't shoot  
a man  
with a cold*

*Lt. E. Alan Mackintosh MC 1893–1917*  
POET OF THE HIGHLAND DIVISION

COLIN CAMPBELL  
ROSALIND GREEN

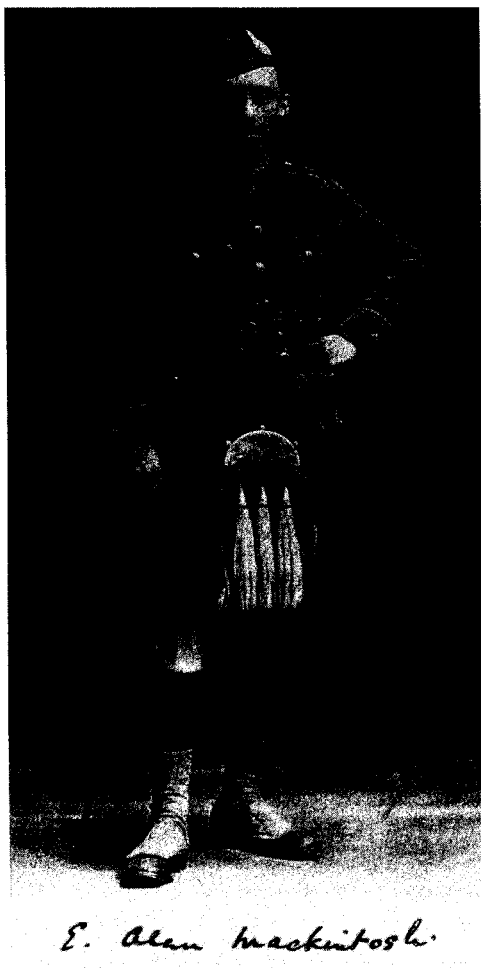
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Ewart Alan Mackintosh,  
Second Lieutenant, Seaforth Highlanders,  
1/5th (Sutherland and Caithness) Battalion  
Gazetted 1st January 1915

## PROLOGUE

Ewart Alan Mackintosh aspired to be a poet. He wrote poetry in school, university and the army, and before he went to the Western Front for the first time arranged in his will for an anthology to be published. Although his poems are uneven in quality, and reflect highs and lows of his experience, he worked at his writing, and wanted to be judged as a poet. But he was also a schoolboy, a student, a man in love, and a soldier.

This book has been written to explore these many facets of Mackintosh's short life. Being a poet numbers him amongst a tiny minority: as a soldier he shared his experience with millions. His life must therefore be reflected against the background of the most brutal and expensive war then known to history.

The First World War was the outcome of a fatal concoction of aggressive nationalism, prejudice, blind patriotism, and economic competition. It was initially sustained by the peoples of Europe who had been conditioned to accept and respect their governments. Both sides were innocently optimistic about the likely length of the war, and thought that it would be 'over by Christmas'. By November 1914 the war of manoeuvre was over and the static trench warfare that characterised the Western Front was well established. The armies faced each other from lines of ditches, hacked out of chalk or clay. Where the water table was too close to the surface breastworks of sandbags were built. Each trench system was protected by barbed wire entanglements. Behind the front line trenches were support and reserve trenches, connected to one another and the relative safety of the rear, by communication trenches.

No Man's Land lay between the opposing wire entanglements: it could extend for a mile, or be as little as a few yards, and was littered with human remains and the material debris of battle, broken by shell holes, and infested with corpse rats. Most casualties were caused by shelling, which crashed on the trenches, demolishing them, wounding or fragmenting their occupants, or burying them

as the sides caved in. Snipers shot the careless, the indifferent, the unlucky and the suicidal. Where the geology was appropriate mines were tunneled beneath enemy trenches, explosives detonated and the crater occupied by attacking infantry.

Attacks were preceded by artillery bombardments on the enemy trenches and supply routes. Early in the war these did little damage as the British were short of shells, but by 1916 they were so destructive that advancing infantry often found the battlefield almost impassable. The conclusion of the barrage, or its forward movement, alerted the enemy to the inevitable infantry attack. Led by their junior officers the soldiers clambered out of their trenches to be met by the withering rifle and machine gun fire of the enemy who had survived the shelling. Units that did reach the enemy's front line were almost invariably trapped there or forced to withdraw, as the enemy's artillery cut them off from supplies and reinforcements.

It was a measure of the patriotism, mutual loyalty and obedience of the men that battalions that had been reduced in battle by half or more, would, after a short rest and reinforcements, go back to give and take more punishment. Although there were firing squads for deserters, it is an insulting over-simplification to suggest that this was the sole motive for going forward.

A battalion at full strength numbered 1,000 men. During the war the battalion featured in this book, the 1/5th Seaforth Highlanders, had 5522 men of all ranks pass through it. Of these 730 were killed, 2485 wounded and 300 were pronounced missing, presumed dead.<sup>1</sup> These statistics are typical of many infantry battalions in France. By 1919, 3.1% of Scotland's adult male population had been killed, against 1.6% of the male population of the British Isles. This was partly attributable to Scotland having a disproportionately large number of regular and territorial infantry regiments, all of which recruited new battalions, and partly to Scottish units being successful in assault, and being regularly deployed as shock troops, with concomitant high casualties.

While the principle reason for deadlock was the ability of sufficient defenders to survive a bombardment and emerge with their weapons intact, a number of other factors contributed to the failure of the British. Neuve Chapelle in May 1915 failed through

lack of artillery preparation. Loos, in September 1915, saw the advantages of a two mile penetration through the German lines by the 15th Scottish Division lost by the surviving troops going astray due to inexperienced leadership and the fog of war, by tired raw reserves being thrown into battle, and by the best reserves being retained too far from the front – a combination of bad leadership, poor planning and inadequate training.

The 20,000 dead and 38,000 wounded on the first day of the Battle of the Somme, 1st July 1916, can be attributed to over-optimism by the generals, bad intelligence, and the failure of the artillery to destroy the enemy wire and the deeply dug-in German defenders. The advances on the Somme from July until November 1916 cost 420,000 British casualties, and took the British between two and eight miles from their start line. The Third Battle of Ypres (Passchedaele) in August 1917 took place in Flemish weather conditions which should have ensured a postponement; in mud which made the use of tanks an absurdity, and the deployment of troops a crime.

Until the autumn of 1917 the war was of a series of hopes dashed, lives expended, enthusiasm exhausted, and hard lessons learned, for gains that were measured in yards. The first day of the Battle of Cambrai, on 20th November 1917, punched a hole in the German front line, and seemed to herald an end to trenchlock on the Western Front. In Spring 1917 the Germans had retired to the newly constructed Hindenberg Line. This well-sited triple trench system was over four miles deep in places, with fifty metres width of barbed wire in front of each line of trenches. Some trenches were broad enough to ditch tanks, and innumerable concrete machine gun positions had been built.

The key element by the British was the surprise use of massed tanks, which had rehearsed trench clearing tactics with their supporting infantry. Tanks were detailed to roll up the barbed wire with grappels. The tanks had been moved into position behind the British lines under cover of darkness, and of the noise of artillery and aircraft. To avoid warning the enemy or making the ground impassable to tanks, the thousand gun barrage began as the three hundred and fifty tanks moved forward, disguising the noise of their movement and keeping the enemy's heads down. To cross wide trenches the tanks carried huge bundles of brushwood, which

(1) Page 3, War Diary of the 5th Seaforth Highlanders, Captain D. Sutherland. John Lane, 1920.

they dropped into them, and then drove over.

The tanks and infantry rapidly carved their way through impotent and initially demoralised German defences. There was a hold-up with the 51st (Highland) Division, arguably because its General Harper had ignored the tactics laid down for infantry and tank co-operation, and kept his infantry too far behind the tanks. In addition a German artilleryman at Flesquières Ridge destroyed five tanks, and slowed the advance.

Later on the 21st tanks scheduled to co-operate with the Highland Division's advance were delayed and its 154th Brigade went into action without them. The 4th Gordon Highlanders and the 7th Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders led the attack, followed by the 9th Royal Scots and the 4th Seaforth Highlanders.<sup>2</sup>

In No.4 Company of the 4th Seaforth Highlanders a tall, lean, bespectacled lieutenant, with very bad eyesight, and a limp, advanced with his platoon. He wore the purple and white ribbon of the Military Cross, and a Sutherland tartan kilt, unlike the Mackenzie worn by his men. He was Lieutenant E. Alan Mackintosh MC, 5th Seaforth Highlanders, who had been attached to the 4th Seaforth Highlanders for six weeks.<sup>3</sup>

He was then twenty four years old and had recently become engaged to a girl with whom he hoped to emigrate to New Zealand after the war. Alan Mackintosh was no gullible innocent, taking part in his first campaign. He had a year's front line service, an award for gallantry, and had been wounded and gassed. After his convalescence he had an important job training officer cadets in Cambridge. Modern assessments of his situation before returning to France in 1917 would suggest that he had made a substantial personal contribution to the war effort, and that he could have spent the rest of the war in Britain with a clear conscience: his engagement in 1917 adds force to this. However, he volunteered to go back to France, a conscious decision made by many others who could have stayed at home.

Much of what Alan Mackintosh said, thought and did, as a young man and an officer may now seem mildly absurd. That is only

justifiable if we ignore his background; or if hindsight is a legitimate basis for judgment. It is not. Our hindsight was bought at the expense of Mackintosh and his generation, and the succeeding generation, and their sacrifice has coloured our approach to patriotism, war, and the international community.

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(2) Page 250, *The History of the 51st Highland Division 1914-1918*, F.W. Bewsher. Blackwood, 1921.

(3) 4th Seaforths' war diary, Queen's Own Highlanders museum, Fort George, Inverness.