

GREAT WAR STAINED GLASS WINDOW MEMORIALS IN KENT

No. 3: St Barnabas, Beckenham, Kent

Major Neil Macpherson

2nd King Edward VII's Own Gurkha Rifles (The Sirmoor Regiment)

KIA 31 October 1914, Neuve Chapelle, France

Window: St Barnabas, Beckenham, Kent

Kent links: Commissioned in The Buffs (East Kent Regiment)

Medals: Campaigns, Isazai Expedition North West Frontier 1892; Samana and Tirah 1897-98; South Africa 1900-02, Queen's Medal (4 clasps); Abor Expedition 1911-12; 1914 Star

War Grave: None. Commemorated Neuve-Chapelle Memorial

Neil Macpherson was part of a family that had a tradition of service in the army at the very highest levels. His paternal grandfather was Lt-Col in the 78th Regiment (Highlanders) and his maternal grandfather was Lt-General in the Indian Army. His father, Major-General Sir Herbert Taylor Macpherson (1827-1886), won the VC during the Indian Mutiny and served in numerous campaigns in India, Afghanistan, Egypt—including the battle of Tell al-Kebir in 1882—and Burma, where he died of fever.¹

Although not the oldest at death, Macpherson was the earliest born of all the individuals commemorated in stained glass in the churches of Kent. He was born on 8 August 1869 in Inverness, Scotland and was the youngest son. He was educated at Inverness College and decided to follow family tradition by joining the army. The family was not well off, but a route existed for Macpherson to enter Sandhurst. The Secretary of State for India had the power annually to nominate, as Queen's (Indian) Cadets, a small number of officer candidates for places at Sandhurst. These places were open to sons whose fathers had served either in the Indian army or in the Indian Civil Service. An examination had to be passed, but the successful applicants were exempt from all fees while at the College.² No doubt when Macpherson applied there were few applicants whose father had won a VC in India.

Queen's (Indian) cadets had the choice of either nominating for a regular English regiment or the Indian Staff Corps. Macpherson chose the former and when he passed out of Sandhurst in June 1890 he was gazetted to The Buffs (East Kent Regiment).³ Fifteen months later, however, he transferred to the Indian Staff Corps. His main motive would have been to follow in the footsteps of his father, who had been Colonel of the 2nd Gurkha Rifles (the regiment that Macpherson joined in September 1891), but it is also possible that financial considerations played a part.⁴ Officers in the British army, even in a county regiment, needed a private income to cover the cost of living in a mess and of upholding the reputation of the

¹ H.M. Chichester, 'Macpherson, Sir Herbert Taylor (1827-1886)', rev. James Falkner, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* [on-line edition, accessed 9 November 2014].

² Timothy Bowman and Mark Connelly, *The Edwardian Army: Recruiting, Training and Deploying the British Army, 1902-1914* (Oxford 2012), p.11.

³ *London Gazette*, 3 June 1890, p.3135.

⁴ *Ibid*, 8 December 1891, p.6780.

regiment.⁵ When his father Sir Herbert died in 1886, he left only £750 and Neil was the youngest son.⁶ Officers in India could live more cheaply and had better chances of promotion.

Service in the Indian Army enabled Macpherson to afford marriage. His wife, Mary, was from a military family, her father being Colonel Robert Home, CB, of the Royal Engineers. Together they were to have four children, although only two daughters survived infancy.⁷

Like his father before him, Macpherson led an adventurous life in the Indian Army, being involved in five campaigns before the Great War. Most of these were on the North-West Frontier, but he also served in the Boer War between 1900 and 1902, in the Transvaal and Orange River Colony. His last action before 1914 came on the punitive Abor Expedition of 1911-1912 in Assam (on the North-East frontier of India). In his final despatch, the commander, Major-General Bower, commended the 2nd Gurkhas for 'the excellent spirit that pervades the regiment'.⁸

Hunting down tribesmen who had murdered white officials on the Indian frontier was very different to the next ordeal the Gurkhas had to face. In the eighteen months leading up to the Great War discussions between the British and Indian governments had led to agreement that if Britain became involved in a European war an Indian expeditionary force would be sent to help. Immediately war was declared, preparations began to send two Indian infantry divisions and a cavalry brigade. In France and Belgium they were to become known as the Indian Corps and the number of cavalry brigades was increased to six. They sailed for Marseilles in two convoys, the Lahore infantry division leaving at the end of August, the rest on 20 September.⁹ Macpherson had been promoted to Major in June 1908 and in 1914 was second in command of the 2/2 Gurkhas, which was part of the Dehra Dun Brigade of the Meerut Division.¹⁰

The Indian Expeditionary Force was weak in numbers, under-resourced and underprepared, yet it played an important role in shoring up the BEF's defences in October and November 1914 during the crucial First Battle of Ypres.¹¹ As part of the Meerut Division, Macpherson's battalion did not arrive in the line, at Neuve-Chapelle, until the night of 29/30 October, relieving shattered battalions of the 7th and 9th Brigades in II Corps. They endured a daunting introduction to fighting on the Western Front. By 31 October, the day that Macpherson was reported killed, the Indian Corps suffered casualties of 35 British and 19 Indian officers and 1511 other ranks.¹² Having survived so many imperial campaigns, Macpherson's time in France was pitifully short.

The stained glass window memorial erected for Macpherson is an unostentatious single light of St Michael. The dedication is simple: *To the glory of God and in memory of Neil*

⁵ David French, *Military Identities: The Regimental System, the British Army, and the British People c.1870-2000* (Oxford 2008), pp.52-53.

⁶ Chichester, 'Macpherson'. When Neil Macpherson's mother died in 1906, she was living in a grace and favour apartment in Hampton Court and left only £253. Probate Records, Ancestry.Co.

⁷ Colonel L.A. Clutterbuck, *The Bond of Sacrifice: A Biographical Record of British Officers who Fell in the Great War*, Vol. 1, p.247.

⁸ *London Gazette*, 16 July 1912, p.5177.

⁹ J.E. Edmonds, *Official History of the Great War: Military Operations France and Belgium 1914* (London 1924), Vol. 2, pp. 8-9.

¹⁰ *London Gazette*, 4 August 1908, p.5734; George Morton-Jack, *The Indian Army on the Western Front: India's Expeditionary Force to France and Belgium in the First World War* (Cambridge 2014), p.5.

¹¹ There was some disagreement about the value of the Indian Expeditionary Force (IEF) on the Western Front. See Ian F. W. Beckett, *Ypres 1914: The First Battle* (Harlow 2006), pp.139, 141 and Morton-Jack, *Indian Army*, pp.171-86.

¹² Edmonds, *Official History 1914*, Vol. 2, pp.221, 223.

Macpherson, Major 2nd KEO Goorkhas, who fell in action 31st Oct 1914 RIP. Unlike the figure of St Michael at Ringwould, the elaborate wings of which emphasize the archangel's role as defender of the heavenly kingdom (see No. 2 in this series), the St Michael in the window in this Beckenham church, in full medieval armour and with the cross of England on his shield, is a much more overtly patriotic symbol, reminding us that in Victorian and Edwardian iconography St Michael and St George were sometimes indistinguishable. Surrounding the figure are also Prince of Wales' feathers, symbolising Macpherson's connection to the Simoor Rifles (the King Edward VII's Own).

It would be easy to assume that there is nothing about the window commemorating Macpherson that sets it apart from a multitude of other stained glass memorials of this era, yet examined closely there is one unique feature. Hidden behind the saint's cloak towards the bottom of the window on the left is a mysterious mask. Only half is visible (see Figure 2), but it appears to be a familiar prop from Greek tragedy. Whether it had a particular purpose, rather than a general meaning on the tragic fate of Macpherson, remains unknown. But it does strengthen the view that stained glass window memorials often had hidden texts known only to the family and friends. It also raises questions relevant to the opinion held by most commentators today, that memorialising the Great War using chivalric language and images was evidence that civilians had no understanding of the realities of modern warfare.¹³ Yet within a conventional Christian and chivalric framework there often lurks a more personal and secret message that does not undermine the primary symbolic meaning of the window's subject but does add an intentional layer of individuality.

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¹³ The classic text supporting this view is Mark Girouard, *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman* (New Haven 1981), chap. 18.



Figure 1: St Michael the English Patriot

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Figure 2: Half-hidden mask from Greek tragedy?

Source: John Salmon. I am very grateful for permission to reproduce this.