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# Col. Sir George McCrae 1860-1928

## Politician; raised “McCrae’s Battalion” in 1914

**B**orn in Aberdeen in 1860, a housemaid’s illegitimate son, **George McCrae** was brought up in Edinburgh by his maternal uncle; and never knew who his father was. His schooling ended at the age of nine when he started work as a bootmaker’s message boy. The next year, he was apprenticed to a hatter. By the age of 21 he had opened his own rival firm of hatters in Edinburgh and went on to have a successful career in the drapery trade.

In 1880 in Dunfermline, George married Eliza Cameron Russell (1861-1913). They had nine children born in Edinburgh between 1881 and 1904. All nine are included on his memorial, including his eldest son killed at Gallipoli.

From 1889 to 1899, George was an Edinburgh Town Councillor and respected City Treasurer for eight years. In 1899 he was elected as Liberal MP for Edinburgh East, resigning in 1909 to become Vice-President of the the Scottish Local Government Board for ten years. Chairman of the Scottish Board of Health from 1919 to 1922, McCrae was re-elected as a Liberal MP in 1923 for Stirling & Falkirk Burghs but lost the seat in 1924.

His careers in business, public service and politics were successful but George McCrae is mostly remembered for “McCrae’s Battalion”, the 16th Battalion Royal Scots. His military life had begun in 1878 as a private in the 3rd Edinburgh Rifle Volunteers and he rose to be commanding officer of the teetotal 6th Royal Scots battalion, the “Water Rats”, in 1905. He left in 1913 to look after his terminally ill wife who died that year.

With terrible war losses reported, McCrae started to raise a volunteer battalion in Edinburgh in November 1914. A Hearts supporter, his campaign began with 11 Hearts footballers enlisting. A stirring speech by McCrae at the Usher Hall, seeking men to come with him, led within 12 days to over 1,000 volunteers joining, including many other sportsmen. McCrae’s Battalion suffered badly in the Somme in 1916 with seven Hearts players killed on the first day alone. The battalion became a vital fighting force in Arras, France. Their bravery and many losses are commemorated by a Memorial Cairn erected at Contalmaison village in 2004. The area outside the Usher Hall where he had made his recruitment speech was named McCrae’s Place in 2014.

McCrae lived at 61 Grange Loan, now demolished, for over 15 years before moving to North Berwick in 1925. He died there in 1928. On 5th January 1929, Edinburgh’s streets were said to be packed with people for his funeral with full military honours.

*Read Jack Alexander’s ‘McCrae’s Battalion’ for a full account of the battalion’s history.*

