

Wigan

Home-Thoughts, from France

(Written on the Somme, May 1918)

by

Donald Alexander Mackenzie



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Edited

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J. A. Hilton

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2005

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Preface

The text of Donald Alexander Mackenzie's 'Wigan: Home-Thoughts, from France (Written on the Somme, May 1918)' has been circulating for some time as a photocopied typescript and on the Internet. Mr Alan Kay researched Mackenzie's life with a view to publishing the poem with illustrations by Mr Gerald Rickards, the profits to go to Wigan Hospice. Meanwhile, Mr Kay has encouraged this critical edition of the poem, the profits of which will go to the Royal British Legion.

This edition summarises Mackenzie's life, puts the poem in its historical and geographical contexts, and attempts to establish an authentic version.

I am grateful to Mr Kay, who has made available to me the results of his research into Mackenzie's life, to Carre's Grammar School, Sleaford, and to Mr Tom Tulloch-Marshall, Miss Sarah K. Minney, Mr Len Hudson of the Wigan Photographic Archive (Wigan Leisure and Culture Trust) for their assistance, to Mr John McDermott for his comments on the draft, and to Mrs Carol Littler for her help in producing this publication. I am also grateful to the *Wigan Observer* for permission to quote from its report of a speech by Mackenzie and to reproduce his photograph. I am especially grateful to Mr Kenneth P. Mackenzie, the son and heir of D. A. Mackenzie, for permission to publish his father's poem, which is still in copyright, and for generously donating the royalties of this edition to the Royal British Legion.

J. A. Hilton
Wigan
November 2005

Introduction

The Poet

Donald Alexander Mackenzie, the son of Scottish parents, was born on 1 June 1889 at 14 Freckleton Street, Wigan. He was the youngest of the five children of an agent for Singers, the sewing-machine manufacturers. The family then moved to 8 Springfield Street, Wigan, where, together with boarders, they were living at the time of the 1891 census. By 1903 they had moved to Dornoch House, 105 Dicconson Street, Wigan.¹

Young Mackenzie was educated at the Wesleyan School, and then at Wigan Grammar School, which he entered in 1900. He became a pupil teacher in 1905, and gained the Teacher's Preliminary Certificate with distinctions in English, French, and Latin in 1907. He also matriculated for the Manchester Victoria University in the first division with advanced papers in English Literature and English History, and won the Sir Francis Powell Exhibition, which provided him with the financial means to attend university. He obtained a B. A. (Hons) Class II in English Language and Literature in 1910, and was awarded an M. A. in 1911.²

He embarked on a career as a teacher, first at Carre's Grammar School, Sleaford, Lincolnshire, from 1910, and then at the Central Secondary School, Sheffield, Yorkshire, from 1913.³

His teaching career was interrupted by the First World War. He joined the Territorial Army, and entered the Royal Artillery, serving with the Royal Field Artillery in 317 (Northumberland) Brigade of the 63rd (Royal Naval) Division, fighting on the Western Front. He was commissioned as a second lieutenant in 1916, and full lieutenant in 1918, and he ended the war as an acting captain.⁴ Meanwhile, he was awarded the Military Cross. His citation reads:

For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty. When the limbers and teams of the battery were heavily shelled he prevented more casualties by the prompt and courageous assistance he rendered.

Later, when an enemy aeroplane bombed and set fire to the ammunition dump, he extinguished the fire whilst the aeroplane was still overhead.

Throughout the operations by his coolness under fire he set a fine example to all.⁵

After the war he returned to Sheffield to become the City Secretary for Higher Education, and then left for London to become Assistant Editor of the *Teachers' World*. It was during this time that he returned to Wigan as guest of honour at the Wigan Grammar School Old Boys' Association Annual Dinner in 1935. He declared that:

Once he was a teacher, but now he was a journalist, and he did not think that he would ever change, for it was the only career in which an entirely unknown person, provided he had resource and nerve, could meet the famous men and women of the day.

He recalled his teachers who had given him his first love of poetry. He then went on to explain that:

Once he asked Mr Arnold Bennett [the novelist who set many of his books in the industrial landscape of the Potteries] why no poet had immortalised industrial Britain. His reply was that it was too desolate and ugly. [Mackenzie] did not agree, especially as regards Wigan and its surroundings. Nature showed all her glories in and about Wigan just as in any other place in the world. He hoped he would convey what he wished to express in the following poem, which he wrote in 1918, when on the Somme.

He then read the poem published here. He seems to have published no other poems.⁶

In 1944, he went into films, becoming Principal of Gaumont British Education Division, but when the studio closed this department in 1949 he was made redundant and became a freelance journalist. At this time he was living in Ashted, Surrey. He died at Worthing Hospital on 22 October 1971.⁷

The Poem

Mackenzie belonged to the generation that produced the Georgian poets, who, in the early years of the reign of King George V (1910-36), sought to write poetry that was traditional in form, plain and colloquial in diction, and celebrated rural life. Mackenzie's verse is deceptively simple in form. It consists of eight-line stanzas. Prosody, the study of the rhythm of verse, divides a line of verse into feet, and classifies them as follows: iambic, that is an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one, e.g. 'behold'; trochaic, a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed, e.g. 'tiger'; dactylic, a stressed syllable followed by two unstressed, e.g. 'desperate'; and anapaestic, two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed, e.g. 'anapaest'. Each line of this poem usually has three or four iambic feet, for example 'From Harrock Hill to Roby Mill'. The iambic pattern, however, is varied. Sometimes there is an extra syllable at the end of a line, for example 'I see the shadows dapple', so that as well as several lines of eight syllables, there are even more of seven. Sometimes, a line is trochaic, for example 'Hunter's Hill's a noble foreland'. The rhyme scheme of each stanza is as follows: the second and fourth lines rhyme, as do the sixth and eighth, but the other lines are unrhymed. The language is certainly simple and direct, the only examples of conventionally poetic diction being the use of the words *purling* and *mavis*.

The imagery is almost entirely rural. Like a good soldier, Mackenzie takes the high ground, and from the heights round Wigan- Harrock Hill, Ashurst Beacon, Billinge Beacon, Hunter's Hill, Upholland, Anglezarke - looks down on the woods and meadows. The places mentioned in the poem are identified in the 'Notes to the Poem'.

Many of the places were within easy walking distance of Mackenzie's home. The more distant places were easily reached, for the 1910s were supplied with a dense and efficient railway network, and were also the heyday of the bicycle. There are only two references to industrial features. The first is to the railway, but it is in a rural setting:

Oh, the green of tender birches,
Oh, the scent of alien pines,
In the cutting where the sunlight
Dances down the railway lines!

The second is to the spectacular effect of light over the Kirkless Coal and Iron Works:

By the glare that lit the heavens
Over Kirkless after dark.

Wigan at the beginning of the twentieth century was industrialised, but it was not built up, and, as in John Pit Wood, industry and the countryside co-existed. As Mackenzie explained he hoped to show that the beauties of nature were to be found in and around Wigan.

Some of the Georgian poets, like Rupert Brooke and Edward Thomas became War poets. Mackenzie's response to the First World War was neither to glorify nor to condemn it, but to turn his back upon it, and seek the comfort of home. He did not exult like Rupert Brooke, 'Now, God be thanked Who has matched us with His hour,' or rage like Wilfrid Owen:

If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs.

Mackenzie's reaction is more like that of Ivor Gurney, who at Ypres wrote of the 'Gloucester orchards' and 'the Severn wind'.

One can, perhaps, detect the influence of A. E. Housman on Mackenzie's verse. Housman's *A Shropshire Lad* was carried by some British soldiers on the Western Front, and Mackenzie's use of place names to conjure up a picture of a beloved landscape, Housman's 'land of lost content', is found in the latter's poetry in such lines as

Clunton, Clunbury,
Clungunford and Clun,
Are the quietest places
Under the sun.

Mackenzie's poem is the poetry of nostalgia, which literally means home-sickness. He uses place-names, 'dear names of home', 'such old sweet-sounding names', as an incantation to conjure up a pastoral, Arcadian Wigan, a 'Sweet continent of childhood', an 'enchanted country'.

The Text

The text of this edition of the poem is based on four earlier versions: a photocopy of a typescript, headed 'HOME THOUGHTS FROM FRANCE. BY DONALD MACKENZIE. WAR 1914-18.'; a copy published on the Internet at a site, which has since vanished, entitled 'A poem by A. McKenzie, with thanks to Marjorie Jackson for sending it in'; the version published in *Past Forward*, No. 40 (July-November 2005), headed 'WIGAN (Written on the Somme, May 1918)', accompanied by the following editorial note: 'Donald Mackenzie, a Wigan soldier, wrote this nostalgic poem in the final year of World War I. My thanks to Harry and Brenda Short of Leeds for kindly sending it to me'; and the untitled version, which was read by Mackenzie at the Wigan Grammar School Old Boys' Association Annual Dinner and published in the *Wigan Observer* on 9 February 1935. This authoritative version seems to be the source for the other versions. Mackenzie may have supplied it to the *Wigan Observer* directly or indirectly. Then again, it may have been taken down in shorthand by a reporter, then typed-up and typeset at the *Wigan Observer* office. The omission of *rolling* from line 31 suggests the latter alternative.

These versions differ in many respects, and, in the absence of a holograph copy or a publication by Mackenzie himself, I have tried to produce an authentic version. Where these sources differ, I have chosen between them or offered my own reading, based on grammar, punctuation, spelling, prosody, and meaning. For the details of some of these editorial choices, see the notes. I have, however, accepted the *Wigan Observer* version unless there were very strong reasons for rejecting it.

The major difference between the sources is in the structure of the poem. The typescript begins with an eight-line stanza, followed by one of four lines, then one of seven, then one of six, and finally one of eight. The Internet version has ten stanzas of four lines each. The *Past Forward* version follows the *Wigan Observer* in having five stanzas, each of eight lines. The authority of the source, consistency, sense, prosody, and punctuation approve the *Wigan Observer* arrangement. I have numbered every tenth line.

Notes to Introduction

- 1 Wigan Register Office, Certified Copy of an Entry of Birth; 1891 Census; *Wigan Directories, 1903, 1909-10*.
- 2 Deane Little, *Our Old Sunday School (and Day School) - 150 Years of Wigan Methodism* (Wigan, 1933); Wigan Archives Service, Leigh, Wigan Grammar School Association, Wigan Grammar School Rolls; *Wigan Grammar School Magazine*, I (5) (1910), I (6) (1910), I (8), (1911); Carre's Grammar School, Sleaford, Archives, Mackenzie to Headmaster, 8 February 1951, 13 Feb 1951.
- 3 Carre's G. S., Archives, Mackenzie to Headmaster.
- 4 Public Record Office, London, War Office Records.
- 5 *London Gazette*, 2 December 1918, p. 14251.
- 6 *Wigan Observer*, 9 February 1935.
- 7 Carre's G. S. Archives, Mackenzie to Headmaster; General Register Office, Certified Copy of Entry of Death.

Wigan
Home-Thoughts, from France
(Written on the Somme, May 1918)

Donald Alexander Mackenzie

From Harrock Hill to Roby Mill, 1
 From Lathom House to Standish,
 From Arley's moated manor
 To the Cross of Mabel's anguish;
 From windy pike to chequered plain,
 Each meadow, copse and wildwood -
 I love you all, dear names of home,
 Sweet continent of childhood.

There's bluebells now in John Pit Wood,
 And baby ferns unfurling; 10
 And in the dell beside Wood Folds,
 A tiny beck is purling;
 I see the shadows dapple
 Underneath the beeches tall,
 Where the Roman road goes dipping
 Down the slope to Giant's Hall.

The birds are all returning
 To Balcarres' stately park,
 In the wood the mellow mavis,
 On the lea the soaring lark. 20
 Oh! the green of tender birches,
 Oh! the scent of alien pines,
 In the cutting where the sunlight
 Dances down the railway lines!

From the steps of Ashurst Steeple
 You can see the ships at sea
 From the bluffs of Billinge Beacon
 All the way to Anglesey.
 Hunter's Hill's a noble foreland,
 At its feet a sea of green, 30
 For a thousand rolling meadows
 From its summit may be seen.

By the steeps of old Upholland,
By the delphs of Anglezarke,
By the glare that lit the heavens
Over Kirkless after dark:
Oh! I swear by every acre
That a link of memory claims,
There is no enchanted country
With such old sweet-sounding names! 40

Notes to the Poem

Wigan etc.: I have combined the titles used in the sources. *Home-Thoughts, from France* is an echo of Robert Browning's *Home-Thoughts, from Abroad*. I have added the hyphen and comma to accord with Browning.

[line] 1. *Harrock Hill* stands to the north-west of Wigan, and *Roby Mill* is a hamlet on the ridge to the west of Wigan.

1. 2. *Lathom Hall* or House was an eighteenth-century house, which had replaced an earlier house, in the Lancashire plain. In Mackenzie's time, two wings survived. *Standish* is a village to the north of Wigan.

1. 3. *Arley's moated manor* is Arley Hall, now the club-house of Wigan Golf Club, to the north of Wigan.

1. 4. *The Cross of Mabel's anguish* is Mab's Cross in Wigan, so called because Lady Mabel Bradshaigh was condemned to do penance for bigamy by walking barefoot every week from Haigh Hall to the cross.

1. 5. *Windy pike* is a reference to Rivington Pike, a peak crowned with a beacon-tower, on Rivington Moor to the north-east of Wigan. I am tempted to read *Pike* rather than *pike*, as I know of no other *pikes*, but the common noun *pike* is balanced by the common noun *plain*.

1. 9. *There's bluebells*: this colloquial expression appears in the *Wigan Observer*, while the typewritten edition has *There are*, which is grammatically correct, but spoils the scansion. *John Pit Wood* is probably Birley Wood, a continuation of Elnup Wood, in Shevington, near the site of the John Pit, in Standish Lower Ground. A cenotaph commemorates the men of John Pit, Taylor Pit, and the Slack Washer who died or served with distinction in World War I. The plaque listing their names is now in the peace gate of Standish parish church, whilst a replica is at St Anne's, Shevington.

1. 11. *Wood Folds* is *Standish Wood Folds* on Standish Wood Lane.

1. 12. The typescript has *furling*, an obvious error. *Past Forward* has a semi-colon after *purling*, but a full-stop is simpler.

1. 15. *The Roman road*, running north from Wigan to Standish, is shown on the old Ordnance Survey maps.

1. 16. *Giant's Hall* is a farmhouse just to the north of Wigan. In Mackenzie's time, there was also a colliery there.

l. 17. *The birds are all returning*: *Past Forward* omits *all*, but this word is demanded by the scansion.

l. 18. *Balcarres' stately park* is Haigh Plantations, the Haigh Hall estate, then the seat of the Earls of Crawford and Balcarres, to the north-east of Wigan.

l. 19. *Mavis*: a song-thrush.

ll. 23-24. *The cutting ... the railway lines*: the railway, the Whelley Loop Line, which ran through Haigh Plantations, is now closed, but the cutting is still there.

ll. 25-28. *Ashurst Steeple* is Ashurst's Beacon on the ridge to the west of Wigan. *Billinge Beacon* is another beacon-tower to the south-west of Wigan. The sense of these lines is that from Ashurst's and Billinge Beacons one can see across the sea to Anglesey, not that the sea stretches from the foot of Billinge Beacon. *Past Forward* has a semi-colon after *sea*, which makes no sense, and a superfluous exclamation mark after *Anglesey*, which it and the other versions misspell as *Anglesea*.

l. 29. *Hunter's Hill* is near Harrock Hill to the north-west of Wigan.

l. 31. *A thousand rolling meadows*: the *Wigan Observer* omits *rolling*, thus spoiling the rhythm.

l. 33. *The steeps of old Upholland* refers to the ridge on which Upholland stands to the west of Wigan. An alternative reading is *steps*, as there are many in Upholland, but they are there because of the *steeps*, which avoids a repetition of *steps* in l. 25.

l. 34. *The delphs of Anglezarke* refers to Anglezarke Reservoir on the moors to the north-east of Wigan. *Delph* is a local word for a hollow, and there is also a Delph Reservoir nearby and *delph* is a local word for *quarry*. The typescript follows the *Wigan Observer*, though *Past Forward* has *depths*, and the Internet has *depth*.

ll. 35-36. *The glare that lit the heavens over Kirkless after dark* refers to the light from the blast-furnaces of the Kirkless Works, known locally as *Top Place*, of the Wigan Coal and Iron Company, at Top Lock, New Springs, Aspull, to the north-east of Wigan. This glare may have attracted the German zeppelin that bombed the district on 12 April 1918. The Kirkless Works were subsequently closed. The *Wigan Observer* has *that lit*, while the other versions have *upon*.

MACKENZIE'S WIGAN
(not to scale)

**Standish
Wood Folds**

Arley

John Pit Wood

Giant's Hall

Haigh Plantations

Kirkless

**Mab's Cross
WIGAN**

MACKENZIE'S SOUTH LANCASHIRE
(not to scale)

Anglezarke

Harrock Hill

Hunter's Hill

Standish

Ashurst's Beacon

Roby Mill

Lathom

Upholland

WIGAN

Billinge Beacon

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Wigan: Home-Thoughts, from France
(Written on the Somme, May 1918)

by Donald Alexander Mackenzie, M.A., M.C.,
has been circulating in various forms ever since the author read the poem at the Wigan Grammar School Old Boys' Association Annual Dinner in 1935.

It expresses a soldier's nostalgia for his hometown.

This edition is accompanied by an introduction, which recounts Mackenzie's life, sets his poem in its context, and explains how the text has been reconstructed. Notes identify the places mentioned in the poem.

All profits from this publication will be donated to the Royal British Legion.