



Middle-Aged Subaltern: Gerald Archibald Arbuthnot (1872-1916): MP, Royal Navy Officer and Grenadier Guardsman

Among the officers of the Guards Division that made two attacks at Lesboeufs on the Somme in September 1916 were a small number of 2nd Lieutenants who were over the age of forty. When examining the British junior officer class during the Somme campaign historians have tended to focus on their youthfulness. Less appreciation has been given to those who, despite being overage, were determined to become involved in the war in a fighting capacity. Middle-aged volunteer subalterns could be an embarrassment for battalion commanders, who were uneasy at the prospect of young company officers having to give orders to men old enough to be their fathers.¹ In the Brigade of Guards, however, age did not seem to matter, as long as the volunteer was medically fit, socially acceptable and came from a family with a military background. Algernon Hasler, for instance, born in 1875 and working for the Chamber of Mines in South Africa when war broke out, was commissioned in the Grenadier Guards and went to the Front in July 1916. He had fought with the Imperial Yeomanry in the Boer War and with Botha's South African force in German South-West Africa in 1914. He was the brother of Brigadier-General Julian Hasler, killed at Ypres in April 1915.

Even older, forty-five in 1916, was Louis Campbell-Murdoch, a Barbary Coast merchant living in Casablanca at the outbreak of war. One of his three younger brothers had been killed during the Boer War serving with the Cameron Highlanders. Another was a Commander in the Royal Navy (who survived the sinking of the submarine A8 in Plymouth Sound in 1905) and yet another won the MC during the Great War. Despite his age, his short sight, and his regular sufferings from the tropical diseases malaria and sprue, Campbell-Murdoch was determined to volunteer for a combat unit. A doctor, impressed by his keenness, passed him fit and he was gazetted to the Scots Guards, going to France in February 1916.²

Campbell-Murdoch was the oldest subaltern in the Guards Division, but Gerald Archibald Arbuthnot, former Conservative MP for Burnley, was only one year younger. He was to survive Hasler, Campbell-Murdoch and two subalterns in their fortieth year—Dormer Treffrey of the Coldstream and Lionel Whitefoord of the Irish Guards—by only ten days, but had the distinction of serving in both the Royal Navy and the army during the Great War.

Arbuthnot, an only child, was born into a military family at Prince's Gate, London in December 1872.³ His father William was a Major-General and Assistant Adjutant-General at the War Office and his grandmother was a daughter of Field-Marshal Hugh Gough, who had

¹ See, for example, Graham H. Greenwell, *An Infant in Arms: War Letters of a Company Officer 1914-18* (1935: Uckfield, n.d.), p. 175.

² Hope Macaulay [Campbell-Murdoch's wife], 'Memoirs of my early life in Casablanca', unpublished paper. I am grateful to Stuart Roberts for allowing me access to this document.

³ His mother was William Arbuthnot's second wife, the first having been killed by lightning in Switzerland while the couple were on honeymoon. *The Caledonian Mercury*, 24 June 1865.

fought in the Peninsular and Crimean Wars, in China and in India. Arbuthnot, however, chose to join the navy, not the army, and was educated at Dartmouth Royal Naval College where, according to a close friend, he imbibed the values of 'self-reliance, initiative, courage to act in the absence of instructions, command of men, organisation, fortitude and patience'.⁴ In 1891 when a Sub-Lieutenant, he acceded to his father's wishes and resigned from the navy. What his father expected him to do remains unclear, for General Arbuthnot died soon afterwards. It is possible that he wanted his son to follow family tradition and make his career in the army.

Arbuthnot's own inclination, once he had a free choice, was to pursue a career in public affairs and in 1892 he went up to Trinity Hall, Cambridge. He was ambitious, with strong political views of a Tory reforming character. His chance came in 1895 when he became Private Secretary to the prominent Conservative politician, Walter Long, who had just been appointed President of the Board of Agriculture.⁵ He joined a group of young assistants who were Tory Democrats: paternalist, progressive, promoters of imperial preference and anxious to outflank the new socialism by offering improved conditions and opportunities to the working classes. Had Arbuthnot been born seventy years earlier, wrote his friend and fellow member of Long's coterie, Sir William Bull, 'he would have been welcomed into that small but brilliant group of men of which [Benjamin] Disraeli was the leader when he was [showing] his keen sympathy with the workers and the lonely'.⁶

Arbuthnot followed Long as he became, successively, President of the Local Government Board and Chief Secretary for Ireland, all the time preparing himself for Parliament. He made an important contribution to the planning that led to the Unemployed Workman's Act of 1905, which created an unemployment board that was intended to give centrally-funded work and training programmes to the increasing number of unemployed.⁷ In the same year, together with his wife whom he had married in 1894, he began to woo the electors of the working-class town of Burnley in Lancashire. In the election that brought the Liberals to power for the first time in twenty years, Arbuthnot did surprisingly well in a contest against Fred Maddison, a popular local Labour leader, and H.M. Hyndman, the veteran socialist, losing to the former by only 392 votes.

Despite his defeat, Arbuthnot continued to spread the gospel of enlightened conservatism to the Burnley electorate, making himself a popular figure especially among the younger working classes. His persistence paid off and in the January 1910 election he managed to win the seat by a margin of ninety-three votes. His tenure was, however, to be short, for in this time of political crisis another General Election was held in December and Arbuthnot lost. When war broke out in August 1914 he was still working to regain the seat.

Arbuthnot's success in Lancashire politics alerted some prominent Tory grandees to his abilities and in 1912 he had been chosen to be Vice-Chancellor of the Primrose League.⁸ This was an extra-parliamentary pressure group founded in 1883 to promote the imperial and Tory democracy principles of Benjamin Disraeli. In its early years Lord Randolph Churchill had used it for his own political purposes in his battle with the leaders of the Conservative Party, but it subsequently became a very effective political weapon in the Tory Party's election armoury. Named after Disraeli's favourite flower (at least, Queen Victoria insisted it was so),

⁴ Sir William Bull, 'Gerald Arbuthnot, a Memoir', *The Burnley News*, 8 November 1916.

⁵ *The Times*, 2 October 1916.

⁶ Bull, 'Arbuthnot'.

⁷ Alvin Jackson, 'Long, Walter Hume, first Viscount Long (1854-1924)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan. 2011 [<http://oxforddnb.com.prospero.murdoch.edu.au/view/article/34591>, accessed 9 Oct 2014].

⁸ Arbuthnot also became an Honorary Secretary of a joint organization with the Women's Unionist Association. Martin Hindley, 'Women and the Nation: The Right and Projections of Feminized Political Images in Great Britain, 1900-18', in Julie V. Gottlieb and Thomas P. Linehan (eds), *The Culture of Fascism: Visions of the Far Right in Britain* (London 2003), p. 18.

tens of thousands of people wore the flower every year on the anniversary of Disraeli's death. Most were members of the working classes, the League seeking to 'embrace all classes and creeds except atheists and enemies of the British Empire'.⁹ The membership of the Primrose League, which included both women and men, peaked at about two million a year or so before Arbuthnot took over and his task was to make some necessary improvements. In 1914 he published, as part of an election guide that he edited, 'The Principles of the Primrose League', which promoted the primacy of the Empire and Tory democratic principles.¹⁰

With his understanding of and sympathy for the working classes and his organizational skills, Arbuthnot would have been a very effective Whitehall public servant on such major issues as recruitment and the realignment of the economy onto a war footing, but he was determined, despite his age, to make a more direct contribution to the war effort. On 10 August 1914 he was appointed Sub-Lieutenant in the RNVR, with his first job being an Intelligence Officer in the naval Press Bureau. This was obviously not to his liking, for within a month he had been transferred to minesweeping duties in the North Sea. For the next thirteen months he commanded a small squadron of trawlers sweeping the seas off the Firth of Forth, with HMS *Columbine* as his base ship.¹¹ It was a necessary, arduous but monotonous task, working with 'rough but gallant men'.¹² Twice Arbuthnot tried to transfer to what he thought would be more important war work. In July 1915 he was refused permission, 'with regret', to transfer to the regular navy and in October he applied to join the Royal Naval Air Service as a trainee observer. When this also was rejected he turned to the army. No doubt using his influence and his father's name, he left the navy on 14 December and received his army commission on the 22nd.¹³

Arbuthnot joined the Grenadier Guards at Windsor and was posted to the 2nd battalion. He was in training for less than five months before being sent to his unit in France. He arrived on 10 May 1916, while the battalion was in billets close to the prison in Ypres. Three days later he was in the trenches near Wieltje, the most junior subaltern in No. 1 Company. There he underwent his first experience of artillery bombardment. He had fulfilled his ambition of "doing his bit" in the trenches'.¹⁴ On the 19th, however, the battalion went by train to St Omer, from where it marched to Tatingham for a period of rest lasting until 7 June.¹⁵

The Guards Division was not on the Somme when the great campaign started on 1 July, but remained in the Ypres sector, where all units were encouraged to be especially active to prevent the Germans from sending reinforcements south. The result was that for the 2nd Battalion 'the monotony of trench life was relieved by the exciting but dangerous ventures of patrols'. On 24th July Arbuthnot led five snipers between the lines, but although they remained out all night, no enemy patrols were seen.¹⁶ This was one of the last actions of the battalion during this tour of duty, for three days later the brigade began its move south towards the Somme.

⁹ Quoted in Alistair Cooke, 'Founders of the Primrose League (act. 1883–c.1918)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, May 2014. [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/theme/42172>, accessed 29 Nov 2014].

¹⁰ *The Spectator*, 11 July 1914.

¹¹ RN Personal Record, G.A. Arbuthnot, TNA PRO ADM 337/117.

¹² *The Times*, 6 October 1916.

¹³ RN Personal Record, G.A. Arbuthnot, TNA PRO ADM 337/117; *London Gazette*, 21 December 1915, p. 12695.

¹⁴ Bull, 'Arbuthnot'.

¹⁵ Sir Frederick Ponsonby, *The Grenadier Guards in the Great War of 1914-19* (London 1920), Vol. 1, p. 372; War Diary, 2nd Battalion Grenadier Guards, 10 May 1916, TNA PRO WO 95/1215. The 2nd Battalion was in the 1st Guards Brigade, Guards Division.

¹⁶ Ponsonby, *Grenadier Guards*, Vol. 1, pp. 375, 377.

The Guards Division's major effort on the Somme occurred between 15 and 25 September 1916, when they made two attacks on the village of Lesboeufs. On the 15th success was limited and casualties, especially amongst the officers, were very high.¹⁷ On this occasion Arbuthnot was left at the transport lines, part of a cadre around which the battalion could be reconstructed after heavy losses. On the 25th, the second major attack during which Lesboeufs was finally captured, he advanced with No. 1 Company, which was in the battalion's vanguard. The battalion went over the top at 12.35pm, but the failure of the artillery to cut the German wire quickly threatened to bring the attack to a standstill. What happened next is explained by the Grenadiers Guards' official history:

Captain A. Cunninghame, Second Lieutenant G.A. Arbuthnot, Lieutenant W. Parnell, and Lieutenant Irvine at once ordered their men to lie down, and the four gallantly advancing by themselves proceeded with the utmost coolness to cut gaps in the wire. Their one thought seems to have been that the attack must not be checked on any account, and as the task of cutting the wire meant almost certain death, they never thought of sending on any of their men, but decided to do it themselves. Captain Cunninghame, Second Lieutenant G. Arbuthnot, and Lieutenant Parnell were killed, and Lieutenant Irvine was wounded, but sufficient room was made for the men to go through, and the Grenadiers swept forward into the first objective.¹⁸

In his subsequent report the 2nd Battalion's CO, Lt-Col C.R.C. de Crespigny, was very critical of the artillery. Angry at the unnecessary loss of his officers, he complained sarcastically that 'The cooperation of the artillery was remarkable for its absence and a great deal of ammunition was expended on ground where no Germans were, and places where Germans could be seen were left untouched'.¹⁹

In the following days the battlefield was cleared and identifiable bodies buried with wooden crosses as markers. After the war, when the Imperial War Graves Commission established permanent cemeteries, Arbuthnot was interred next to Cunninghame in the Citadel New Military Cemetery, Fricourt.²⁰ On his headstone his widow Dulce had had carved: *Faithful unto Death*.

Arbuthnot had had no illusions about the consequences of his decision to seek action with the Guards in France. He knew that his chances of survival, as a subaltern, were slim.²¹ As his friend Sir William Bull wrote, some thought his death untimely. He could, perhaps should, have contributed to the war effort in a way that better utilized his skills. 'I do not pretend', continued Bull:

That he did more than others have done, but he left a wife, whom he tenderly loved, three charming daughters, a large circle of friends, an income sufficient for his simple needs, and a bright career before him, at the call of duty. He leaves behind him a name that will be remembered for sincerity, high ideals, and devotion to duty.²²

There was, however, more than a patriotic sense of duty that impelled Arbuthnot along the path to the Somme. His country needed him more at home than on the frontline, where his

¹⁷ For a short summary of the Guards Division on the Somme up to and including 15 September, see my article on Capt. M.K.A. Lloyd. See also, Cuthbert Headlam, *History of the Guards Division in the Great War 1915-1918* (London 1924), Vol. 1, pp. 151-61.

¹⁸ Ponsonby, *Grenadier Guards*, Vol. 2, p. 80.

¹⁹ Narrative of Events from 24th – 26th Sept. 1916, War Diary, 2nd Battalion Grenadier Guards, PRO WO 95/1215.

²⁰ Commonwealth War Graves Commission data. Irvine was buried in the Guards Cemetery, Lesboeufs. Personal Record, Lt W.A.D. Parnell, TNA PRO WO 339/36382.

²¹ *The Times*, 6 October 1916.

²² Bull, 'Arbuthnot'. Arbuthnot left £15852 in his will. Wills and Probate Records, Ancestry.co. uk.

influence was minimal. His age may have been a motive, the war presenting him with a final opportunity to prove his masculinity before physical decline set in. His family background of military service was also important. Bull hinted as much when he wrote of Arbuthnot's 'hereditary fighting instinct'. Perhaps Arbuthnot was finally fulfilling the wishes of his father?

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