

Maj. M.F.M. Meiklejohn VC and the Battle of Elandsplaagte 21<sup>st</sup> October 1899

*Compiled by Jon Leech, The Brookwood Cemetery Society*



**The grave and memorial to Major Matthew Fontaine Maury Meiklejohn VC can be found in the centre of Plot 3, St. Cyprians Avenue, it was fully restored in March 2015 by courtesy of the VC Trust. Further cleaning and restoration was undertaken by the Brookwood Cemetery team when the cross fell and had to be re-instated in 2019.**

Matthew Meiklejohn was born on 27<sup>th</sup> November 1870, the son of a St. Andrews University Professor. He was educated at Fettes College, Edinburgh (the school Tony Blair later attended) and joined the Gordon Highlanders in India on 17<sup>th</sup> June 1891, aged 21. Six years afterwards the Gordons were heavily involved on the Indian Frontier where he was slightly wounded when his regiment cleared the Dargai Heights, seeing further action in the Bara Valley, during the Tirah Campaign. Whilst serving in India he received an Indian Medal and 3 clasps.

On the outbreak of the Second Boer War in South Africa, the Gordons were sent with the Infantry Brigade from India and Major Meiklejohn was deployed with them.

The book 'With the Flag to Pretoria', By H.W.Wilson (published by Harmsworth in 1900) picks up the story, in a colourful somewhat 'tabloid' propaganda manner.

It starts as follows; **"On October 11<sup>th</sup> 1899**, began what was to prove the greatest struggle in which Britain has engaged since the peace that followed Waterloo. For at 5pm on that day the forty-eight hours allowed by the Transvaal Government for a favourable answer to its ultimatum expired, and the forces of the two Boer Republics put themselves in motion to carry out their favourite threat of sweeping the British from South Africa into the sea.

Great Britain being utterly unprepared, clinging to the hope of peace and distracted by false predictions that the Boers would never fight."

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Before the landing of reinforcements and on receiving news of the secret Boer conspiracy to invade the Natal colony, the British General Sir Penn Symons decided to abandon the extreme north which contained the ill-omened previously disastrous battlefields of Laing's Nek and Majuba. He decided to place as large a force as he could spare at the small town of Dundee, 35 miles from Ladysmith and connected with it by railway. When the reinforcements from India (including Meiklejohn) arrived in the first week of October General Sir George White took over the combined command. The Dundee force under Symons was 4,600 strong with 18 guns. Gen. White's force stationed at Ladysmith numbered 7,500 men and 24 guns. The latter force was reinforced by Natal troops thus on October 20<sup>th</sup> 1899, the Ladysmith strength was up to 9,000.



Gen. Sir W. Penn Symons



Gen. Sir George White

No one considered that Dundee was in any danger, as the opinion of the British officers was that owing to the bad transport arrangements and their defective organisation the enemy would not be able to move for some weeks.

There was little ammunition at Dundee, and the place was entirely dependent on supplies from Ladysmith.

The Boers led by General Kock, and armed with new Mauser rifles, were perfectly informed of the British position and strength, they were determined to attack with the main force of their army.

On October 19<sup>th</sup> they seized a position at Elandsplaagte, astride of the railway between Dundee and Ladysmith. The 20<sup>th</sup> was fixed for the general annihilation of General Symons' force. On the evening of the 19<sup>th</sup> the Boer commander Gen Meyer moved 7,000 men

to seize Talana Hill, a precipitous height to the east overlooking the British camp at Dundee and placed several guns there. The next two days would be decisive. At 2.30am on the 20<sup>th</sup>, as a misty dawn spread over the grey hills, the boom of a heavy gun announced a shell dropping right in the middle of the astonished British.

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Gen. Symons was taken completely by surprise but in the emergency he showed courage with a decision to put his breakfastless, hungry men into the battle to respond to the enemy's artillery fire. The Boers could be seen in silhouette on the crest of the hill, as long as they remained there the position was untenable.

Halfway up the hill where the angle steepened almost to a precipice, ran a stone wall parallel to the ridge. Using this wall as cover it enabled the Boer rifles and cannon to sweep with the deadliest effect the slopes below over which the British must advance.

The Boer heavy guns after a two hour duel with the British artillery either withdrew or were silenced, thus the moment for the infantry assault had come.

The assault by 3 battalions, not more than 2,000 men, attacked 5,000 of the world's best famed guerrilla marksmen in a seemingly impregnable position.

In extended order, with the British cannon firing furiously over their heads the 3 battalions went forward. Under terrible fire from the heights above men began to drop under the rain of bullets. The Dublin Fusiliers and Kings Rifles lost their formation amidst the trees and undergrowth which gave no shelter from the pitiless Mauser rifles of the enemy.

Yet the line did not halt.

Slowly the attack gained ground and began to cross the area approaching the wall. All of the morning General Symons had exposed his position with perfect indifference to death, being more conspicuous by reason of a lancer with a red flag following him everywhere he went to mark his location for his aide-de-camps.

He rode out to encourage his men to take the hill, shouting 'you are fine fellows' and was immediately struck down by a bullet in the groin which, although he assured them he would be back with them, was fatal.

By 10.00 the tide of the British had surged up to the stone wall but the rain of rifle fire pinned them; it would be death to leave their shelter. About 12 noon, however, there came a lull and instantly the British line rushed forward with drums beating and bugles sounding, its officers in advance of the men. Colonel Gunning and Captain Petchell fell, the Boers did not wait to meet the last charge. As the hill was crowned they rode off leaving 100 dead and wounded behind.

47 British dead and 221 wounded strewn the slopes of Talana.

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On the 20<sup>th</sup> Major-General French had gone out from Ladysmith with a small force to reconnoitre. As the troops moved off, far away from the north-east came the dull booming of the cannon, which told of the battle raging at Dundee. When the British troops fell back in the afternoon they heard the news of the great victory at Dundee. This would be the precursor to the events of the 21<sup>st</sup>. General French once more left Ladysmith with cavalry, an armoured train accompanied them. Elandsplaagte was very cautiously approached, but toward 08.30 the enemy came in sight. Their main position was on a long rocky ridge where could be discerned figures on the skyline indicating the enemy was in force.



Seeing the danger Gen French telegraphed for reinforcements, a couple of hours later these began to arrive. Firstly the 5<sup>th</sup> Lancers but then came Col. Ian Hamilton a former Gordon Highlander who had substantial experience in fighting this fierce enemy. He brought with him troops from The Manchester's, Devonshire's and **Gordon Highlanders**.

It was a dark day, a thunderstorm raged over the scene of carnage. The day was advancing and General French sent in the infantry. The Devons were as steady as on parade as the line went forward. Firing volleys from time to time and always gaining ground until they reached the foot of the final steep ascent which led to the summit of the ridge. The fight was similar to Talana Hill the day before, the enemy's guns were fought with the most obstinate courage. Men were dropping every moment; the new Mauser rifle bullets sang through the air thick as a swarm of bees, while in front the crest of the ridge glowed with perpetual rifle fire against the inky blackness of the storm clouds.

On the right the Gordons, Manchesters and Light Horse were also pushing forward. With a roar of cheering they gained the top of the ridge. The bugles sounded the charge, for the Gordons had yet to storm their way along the ridge under a withering stream of lead which poured from a position at its further end.

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The Gordons, after a brief check swept along the ridge, tearing down the barbed wire fences before them, each fence, each step meant death or injury to many gallant men. The fire was so terrific the Highlanders, whose leaders had been shot down, commenced to waver. Captain Meiklejohn, seeing at once the critical position, sprang forward calling on his men to follow him. Although falling desperately wounded almost at once, his conspicuous bravery and fearless example had the effect of steadying the men, who advanced to the assault and captured the ridge.

At last the Boer guns were gained, the men at the guns were bayoneted and some volleys were poured in upon the host of fugitives tearing down the other side of the hill.

It was a complete and decisive victory, the first that had been gained in the war.

The British losses were heavy, considering that less than 3,000 men had been engaged, 55 were killed, 199 wounded, the Gordons suffering most severely. One third of the half battalion engaged were left on the ground, 14 officers, were killed or wounded, amongst them was their colonel and of course Capt. Meiklejohn.

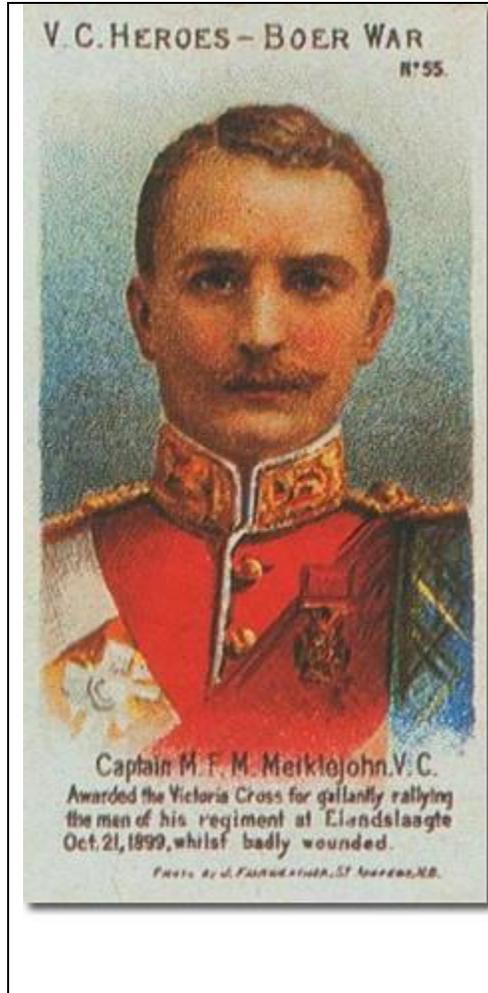
Meiklejohn's wounds were severe, as the following matter-of-fact account reported at the time: *'three bullet wounds upper right arm, smashing bones, little finger right hand shot off, bullet wound left thigh, this no great matter; a snick on neck; his sword and scabbard was smashed with bullets, two bullets through his helmet.'*

As a result of his wounds, Meiklejohn's right arm had to be amputated almost at the shoulder. The operation and his initial recovery took place in Ladysmith while it was under the famous siege from the Boer army which lasted 118 days and starved many of the population before the British were able to relieve the town. Somehow he survived.

On returning to England Meiklejohn was awarded the Victoria Cross, Britain's highest military decoration, which he received personally from Queen Victoria. He became quite a celebrity, with his exploits recorded by several cigarette card manufacturers.

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In keeping with his bravery on the battlefield, his disability did not prevent him from becoming an accomplished golfer.

After a brief stint as garrison adjutant on the island of St Helena, Meiklejohn returned to London where he married in 1904 and, promoted to Major, took a position with the Officer Training Corps. Which is how he came to be riding his horse in Hyde Park on 28 June 1913 as part of an OTC parade.

Meiklejohn's horse was startled at a noise and bolted: perhaps because of his disability the major was unable to control it and the horse careered through the trees into Rotten Row and straight towards the path of a nanny with small children, out for a walk in the park. Realising the danger to the woman and children, at the last minute Major Meiklejohn forced his horse into the iron railings, breaking the horse's neck and knocking the Major unconscious. He was rushed to the Middlesex hospital where, despite an operation to save him, he died a week later (on 4th July rather than 28th June as stated on the memorial tablet erected opposite the site of the accident).

—An Act of Self-Sacrifice.—  
“The Mother of the Children” writes to ‘The Times’: “As my nurse was the only eye-witness of the tragic accident which led to Major Meiklejohn’s death, I think it right to acquaint the public with her story. She and my children were in Hyde Park on Saturday afternoon, June 30. They had reached a spot opposite to Knightsbridge Barracks, and as they were walking along the path Major Meiklejohn on his runaway horse suddenly came upon them from between the trees. In order to avoid danger to the children he turned his horse against the railings of Rotten Row, which he must have known that he could not clear. He thus gave his life for theirs, and added one more to the long roll of his brave and unselfish acts.”



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In compiling this piece for The Brookwood Cemetery Society members I must firstly acknowledge "London Necropolis: A Guide to Brookwood Cemetery", 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition by John M. Clarke. It is this book and earlier writings by John Clarke that gave me interest in the Cemetery.

I have also referred to and paraphrased sections of "With the Flag to Pretoria" by H.W.Wilson, published by Harmsworth and Brothers Limited in 1900.

Jon Leech  
April 2020.