

Early Vancouver

Volume Two

By: Major J.S. Matthews, V.D.

2011 Edition (Originally Published 1933)

Narrative of Pioneers of Vancouver, BC Collected During 1932.

Supplemental to volume one collected in 1931.

About the 2011 Edition

The 2011 edition is a transcription of the original work collected and published by Major Matthews. Handwritten marginalia and corrections Matthews made to his text over the years have been incorporated and some typographical errors have been corrected, but no other editorial work has been undertaken. The edition and its online presentation was produced by the City of Vancouver Archives to celebrate the 125th anniversary of the City's founding. The project was made possible by funding from the Vancouver Historical Society.

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THE STORY OF “A BRAVE SOLDIER AND GALLANT GENTLEMAN.”

“Museum and Art Notes,” Vancouver City Museum, 1929.

This painting in oils is preserved in the Officers’ Mess at the Drill Hall. Its cost, \$500, was raised by collections made by Major J.S. Matthews from old officers and friends. It is said to be an excellent likeness; it lacks one ribbon, green, i.e. the Officers Long Services (Volunteer). Mrs. Hart-McHarg, his mother, handed all her husband’s and son’s papers, documents and trophies to Major Matthews for safekeeping. They are in the City Museum.



LIEUT.-COL. WILLIAM HART-McHARG

Portrait in oils presented, as a token of goodwill, and as a memorial to their distinguished comrade, by former officers of the old "6th Regiment, The Duke of Connaught's Own Rifles," and "7th Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Force, to the present officers of the "British Columbia Regiment, The Duke of Connaught's Own," which regiment now amalgamates and perpetuates the honors and traditions of both former units. The ladies of the "Colonel Hart-McHarg Chapter, I. O. D. E., are also associated with the presentation.

—The portrait is by Victor A. Long, Esq.

Lieut.-Col. William Hart-McHarg

By MAJOR J. S. MATTHEWS



*"War! We would rather peace; but, Mother, if fight we must,
There be none of your sons on whom you can lean with a surer trust.
Bone of your bone are we; and in death would be dust of your dust."*

—From Frontispiece in "From Quebec to Pretoria" by W. Hart-McHarg, 1902.

LIEUT.-COL. Hart-McHarg's splendid career closed at the comparatively early age of 46 years. Early in 1914, just before the outbreak of war, he was offered the command of the Canadian rifle team, proceeding to Bisley that summer. He declined, declaring that his private affairs were so heavy he could not accept. It must have been a bitter decision for so ardent a rifleman—a rifle shot of international fame. Soon afterwards war broke out. He hesitated not a day; private affairs did not then stand in the way, and he led the famous Seventh, Vancouver's "Old Contemptibles," to the front.

Many stories, mostly inaccurate as to facts and detail, have been told and even printed as to how he met his death in the following April. The Canadian official history of the war briefly states that he was mortally wounded while reconnoitring. I have never seen the true story in print. One man, and one man only, Brigadier-General Victor W. Odlum, C.B., C.M.G., D.S.O., then major, and his second in command, knows exactly the details of the incident, for he was the only person present.

General Odlum relates that on the night of April 22nd, 1915, the Seventh was lying in the Ypres salient, and was sent in from "support" to "front line" to block a gap between the 13th Royal Highlanders of Canada and the 14th Royal Montreal Battalion which had been caused by a great breach in the French line when the French colored troops, the Zouaves, gave way under the famous German gas attack. The Seventh occupied a hill, east of St. Julien, at the foot of which was the village of Keersalaere. At that time the trench system was not continuous as it afterwards became, and on the afternoon of the following day, the 23rd, the Seventh was ordered to dig, under cover of that night's darkness, a new trench line. Major Odlum offered to do the reconnoitring for the location of the new line, but Col. McHarg insisted on seeing the situation for himself, so both went together, accompanied by Lieut. Matheson of the Engineers. Proceeding cautiously down hill, they entered the village, and later one of the cottages, when, on looking through the back window, they were amazed to see a strong party of Germans peering over a hedge scarcely fifty feet away. All three turned and ran, Matheson veering off to the left to a ditch and finally escaping, while the other two struck straight up the hill towards their command, some of whom probably saw, at the distance, what was happening without actually understanding its import. As the two officers cleared the village houses, the Germans opened fire in volleys, both threw themselves to the ground, Major Odlum, by luck, jumping into a small shell hole, and, an instant later, Col. McHarg rolled on top of him, exclaiming

"They have got me." He had been struck from behind through the left thigh, the bullet penetrating the stomach.

It was late afternoon. Major Odlum lay in the shell hole awaiting his opportunity, and, after doing what he could to comfort his stricken comrade, left him lying, perhaps half-way between the Germans and our front line, and made a zig-zag dash up the hill, the Germans firing at him as he went. Soon afterwards dusk fell, when Capt. George Gibson, the battalion medical officer, accompanied by stretcher-bearers, reached Col. McHarg, dressed his wound, and had him carried to a little ruined farm house which served as battalion headquarters. He knew he was dying, and during the most part of the evening found comfort in gently clasping the hand of Major Odlum, who, when duty permitted, sat by his side. There were many things he wished to say, but he found great difficulty in speaking. Towards midnight, a Canadian ambulance, by a miracle, found its difficult way to a point quite close, and the colonel, obviously sinking, was conveyed to Poperinghe, where he died the following day. He was buried at Renninghelst, and Major Odlum succeeded to the command of the Seventh.

"In making this particular reconnaissance," said Gen. Odlum recently, "Colonel McHarg proved himself the conscientious gallant officer and thorough gentleman that he had always been. It was not compulsory for him to make the reconnaissance. He could have sent others. He could even have satisfied himself with an examination of the situation from the top of the hill. He did neither—he went himself. He said he would not be doing his full duty were he to do otherwise. The circumstances as he saw them were these: A new emergency trench had to be dug in the battle zone in the midst of an operation, and in the face of an advancing enemy. The question which confronted him was, 'should it be dug on the top of the hill where the battalion then lay out in the open ground, or down at the forward foot of the hill.' Colonel McHarg would not take the responsibility of deciding without personally going out to look over both sites, and in thus doing his full duty he lost his life."

The news of the death of the commander of the "British Columbians" came as a terrible shock to all British Columbia, but especially so to the members of his old unit, the 6th Regiment, "The Duke of Connaught's Own Rifles," of which he had been second in command, and to whose exceptionally high state of efficiency he had so largely contributed. He was a man of great natural ability, and would undoubtedly have risen to high command in the Canadian forces had he lived.

Lieut.-Col. William Frederick Richard Hart-McHarg was born, as he died, "in the service," his birthplace being Kilkenny Barracks, Ireland. He was the only son—second of four children—of Major William Hart-McHarg, quartermaster of H. M's. 44th Regiment of Foot, now "The Essex Regiment," and Jane Scott Thomsett, whose father was a captain in that regiment. Major McHarg was present at the battles of Alma, Inkerman, and Sevastopol in the Crimean War (medal with four clasps), and was awarded the Meritorious Service Medal, an honour created by Queen Victoria, for sergeants only, for distinguished conduct in the field, and now known as the D.C.M. Afterwards he served in the China War, 1860, at Taku Forts. In early life Major McHarg was known as William Hart, but subsequently made a legal declaration re-assuming his father's patronymic of McHarg. Major Hart-McHarg's widow and two daughters still survive in England. His grandfather was Archibald McHarg of Wigtownshire, Scotland.

Educated in England and Belgium, Col. Hart-McHarg made his way to Canada when he was 16, farmed for five years in Manitoba, and at 21 commenced to study

law in Winnipeg, where he supported himself on a salary of \$25 per month. He once reminiscently related that he managed on so small a sum by "washing my own collars, walking to the office, and, as for going to the theatre, why, that was beyond my wildest dreams." In 1891, at 22, he enlisted as a private in the Winnipeg troop of cavalry (volunteers). Four years later, in 1895, he was called to the bar in Manitoba, and then, attracted by the mining activity in the Kootenays, moved to Rossland, became a British Columbia barrister in 1897, and was commissioned a lieutenant in the old Rossland Rifle Company a few months before the Boer War broke out in 1899. Unable to obtain a commission as an officer, he volunteered as a private in the 2nd (special service) Battalion, Royal Canadian Regiment, and was present at the Battle of Paardeberg, the Surrender of Cronje, at Poplar Grove, and the occupation of Bloemfontien and Pretoria (medals with four clasps), returning to Canada with the rank of sergeant, and resumed practice at Rossland. He received his captaincy in the "Rocky Mountain Rangers," and, coming to Vancouver in 1902, joined the 6th Regiment, "The Duke of Connaught's Own Rifles," the following year. He established with the late J. G. L. Abbott, first at Rossland, later at Vancouver, the legal firm of Abbott & Hart-McHarg, subsequently Abbott, Hart-McHarg, Duncan & Rennie. Strangely, one of his most valued clients was the notorious German, Alvo von Alvensleben, whose expensive marble timepiece, presented to the officers of the old "Sixth," was afterwards used by them as a football, and later replaced by a more acceptable one presented by Mr. Fred Buscombe.

As a rifleman—his favorite sport—Col. McHarg's reputation was international. The rifle with which he made the marvellous score of 220 out of 225, and thereby won the World's Championship at Camp Perry, Ohio, together with the official score card in a frame, is still preserved in the officers' mess at the Drill Hall. He shot for Canada in the all-nation "Palma Trophy" contests in 1907, and for British Columbia against the National Guard of Washington. He won the "Perry Trophy" in 1904, the "Governor-General's Gold Medal" in 1908, and again in 1913, the British Columbia "All-Comers' Aggregate" in 1909, and was on the Canadian "Kolapore" team at Bisley in 1907 and 1910. He attended the coronation ceremonies of King George as an officer of the Canadian contingent. He was an ardent Imperialist, was one of the early vice-presidents of the Vancouver Canadian Club, and was one of those responsible for the adoption here of "O Canada" (Buchan version) as an anthem replacing "The Maple Leaf Forever" for public occasions. He gave strong support to the Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire in the days when it lacked its present strength, and his name is now perpetuated in the Col. Hart-McHarg Chapter, I. O. D. E. He managed, for his party, a Dominion election in this city. His successful defence of two men charged with the murder of a woman in Fairview brought him much prominence as a criminal lawyer. He was one of, if not actually, the first advocates here of "daylight saving," and with such success that for a year or so it was adopted. His outward appearance was not strikingly military, for of later years this distinguished officer walked as though he was tired, and his carriage was less erect. His massive face suggested nothing of the frailty of his body, which, through ill-health (indigestion), weighed about 140 pounds. Frequently his diet was merely biscuits and milk. He was a cool, quiet man of commanding personality, and a bachelor. Of his character we can best learn by referring to the tablet erected in Christ Church by the Seventh Battalion, and which is inscribed "erected by his comrades as a tribute to a brave soldier and a gallant gentleman." Soon after his death the Georgia Street viaduct was completed and named the "McHarg Viaduct," but the name has fallen into disuse.

Oddly, this ardent soldier, both in peace and war, wore no military decorations. He was a member of the Vancouver Club. Some months after his death his aged and invalided mother received the personal condolences of His Majesty. A portrayal of the incident shows her reclining in her wheel chair while the King bends over her in conversation. A few months ago Mrs. Hart-McHarg donated to the Vancouver City Museum many interesting documents relating to the services of her illustrious husband and son.

At the conclusion of the Boer War, Col. McHarg published his experiences in South Africa with the Royal Canadian Regiment in a narrative entitled "From Quebec to Pretoria." In the last paragraph he gives beautiful, almost prophetic, expression to his sentiments in referring to his comrades who fell in that war. "On arrival in Canada," he wrote in 1902, "no time was lost in the disbandment of the regiment, and we all betook ourselves to our homes. Unfortunately, all those who went with us did not return. No body of men can take part in a great campaign and expect to come through without suffering casualties. But what better death can a man die than to lay down his life for the honour of his country? The foundation on which will be reared the splendid edifice of the Imperial British Empire is cemented by their blood. They bore the brunt of the campaign; they are its heroes. To them be the honour and the glory." And "The Province" of April 26th, 1915, in announcing his death, concludes its obituary with his own words, "Yes, Col. Hart-McHarg, to them be the honour and the glory."

