



Dr Rory Eric McLaren

Dr Rory McLaren, an Australian, was educated in Australia and came to England as a medical practitioner after the First World War. In the early 1920s he joined Dr Dring's practice at Elmfield (where Elmfield Court now stands) and then took it over when Dr Dring retired. Dr McLaren initially lived in Oaks Road and then at Athos (7 East Cross), which is now Potters, retiring in the late 1940s. During the First World War, Dr McLaren was in charge of a mobile bacteriological unit in Salonika, prior to which he was on research work in connection with meningitis. Among his many activities, he took a keen interest in the religious life of the town and was an active member of the Parochial Church Council while his wife gave valued support to church work in the mission fields.

He entered the Tenterden Borough Council at a bye-election in December 1947 and was elected Mayor in 1954 and 1955. During his Mayoralty the practice of commencing council meetings with prayer was introduced – a custom which has been continued ever since. When Tenterden and District Local History Society was formed in 1955, he was the President for the first two years. Soon after his wife died in 1958, he returned to Australia where he passed away. Despite a long absence from his native land, he kept in close touch with his friends in Australia and to use his own words "there has been a two-way traffic between the two places". Many times friends from Down Under have stayed at his home in Tenterden. Unknown to us in Tenterden, he had made notes of his Second World War experiences on the leaves of books, which (being of value) were bequeathed to his old school in Adelaide.



Dr Rory McLaren



Dr McLaren's car outside Athos (7 East Cross)

Early in 2012, the History Society was contacted by Peter and Carol Crossley, members of Plaxtol History Society, who know Bruce Gordon, one of the retired staff at St Peter's College, Adelaide. The Society was given a transcript of Rory McLaren's jottings. These are given below.

Dr Rory McLaren wrote on the front page of Volume 1 of Gould's Mammals of Australia as follows:

I, Rory Eric McLaren, of Tenterden, Kent, England, Doctor of Medicine, and from 1897-1900 Scholar at St Peter's School Collegiate, Adelaide, South Australia, do hereby give and bequeath these three volumes of Gould's 'Mammals of Australia' to this, my old School; in token of my deep affection and gratitude to it; with the desire that these may be available in perpetuity for the free use of its boys.

Rory McLaren

Tenterden
August 1934

At the end of Volume 1 of Gould's Birds of Australia, Dr Rory McLaren has made the following notes in his own hand-writing (reproduced as written):

September 3rd 1939 Once again, we are at War. Just as we were in 1914. And again, that feeling of moving into the Unknown. Yet England, like Luther, 'can do no other'. It is the right thing to do. What will the world be like when this is finished, we cannot imagine. Probably largely wrecked and exhausted, alike in spirit and economy. Certainly something very different to the present.

Then, in 1916, I was in Macedonia, on the Struma Valley, after the Dardanelles campaign, grappling with incessant malaria and dysentery. Now, I shall be of more use here, amongst these Kentish folk to whom I have been doctor these past sixteen years.

So here I am, half Australian, half English, in practice in Kent. It is 40 years since I have seen my beloved country and that great school of St Peter's, to which I ever look back with boundless gratitude and love. They were happy years in it and they taught me well. I had a retentive memory, hence won many scholarships, ending in 1900 with the Young Exhibition, top of the School. But in the greater gifts of creativeness and originality I was, and am, singularly lacking.

In gratitude to my School, I give them these books. Twelve years was I in pursuit of them, the rarest of all Gould's lovely works. Opportunities of obtaining them were few and far between and always, until recently, beyond my reach. But the quest was thrilling and I ran them to earth at last.

Here in Tenterden, in the County of Kent we are within a dozen miles of the coast, and can see the light of Gris Nez near Boulogne on clear nights. Kent must be in the forefront and bear the brunt of whatever is coming – I would not be elsewhere for worlds. This little English town of 4000 people, with its 800 year old Parish Church – these sturdy Kentish yeomen – how typically English it all is! And the people today – calm resolute, outwardly cheerful: though God knows what thoughts each bears in his heart.

I will keep a War Diary, for interest, and jot down what may happen to us here.

September 4th 1939 Seven hundred evacuees have arrived here from South London this week: our High Street of a morning looks like a cross between Margate and Whitechapel. Practically every house has taken in one or two. It seems strange they should think these children safe so near the coast; but anywhere is better for them than to be in London. We have taken four into our house (of 'Athos'). A mother with her little girl of six, hailing from Tilbury Docks (a sure target some day) and two boys, of 11 and 9, Leslie and Ronald, from Catford in South London. Good type of boys – their father an official in some borough offices.

October 1939 Only about 300 evacuees left here now, nearly all boys and girls. Practically all the parents have gone back, as there has been no attempted bombing of London. Our four are still with us: a very happy arrangement.

January 1st 1940 A very quiet winter. A queer and quiet war, compared with the last.

May 1940 Things have started with a vengeance. The German armies seem sweeping all before them. France has collapsed; and now the whole channel coast opposite us and the whole of the Atlantic coast is in enemy hands. We seem isolated from the rest of the world: alone, now. This day, had a cable from St Peter's Old Scholars Association, offering homes and hospitality to any children of Old Saints whom we can evacuate to Australia. A tremendous encouragement: in these lean days when we feel so completely alone.

June 1940

For three days our men are passing through, from the Dunkirk beaches – dog tired, but cheery. Have no equipment at all, though some have their rifles. My wife, with other ladies, helped to cut up two tons of bread, to give them a feed on their way up to London.

July 1940 Full instructions have been given us, in case of invasion. To keep off the roads, at all costs, so as not to block the military. If fighting should develop in the town, to shelter in the cellars. I am detailed to run the first-aid station near the Church.

August 1940 Air battles overhead nearly every day now. They come over very high, in perfect formation and disappear toward London, 50 miles away. Nothing then happens for about 20-25 minutes; then back they come, all over the sky, in individual dog-fights. Quite a lot of Nazi planes down around here: a few of ours unfortunately.

August 10-11th 1940 Leslie and Ron's parents came down to see their boys and stayed the night with us. A nice couple – the father a fine type, quiet, reliable in any emergency.

August 27th 1940 It is difficult to know where to keep these books safe from fire or bomb. Last night the Nazis showered us with incendiary bombs and several high-explosive. Poor old 'Athos' – this house – went in and out like a concertina, but no harm done to us. Took the Surgical Mobile Unit out to a bombed farmhouse, a

mile away. A dark night, but sky lit by glare from burning farms. Boy of 13, dead, under doorway, poor kid; girl with crushed chest, died before I got her into hospital. God keep us from vengefulness or hatred; may this our suffering be redemptive yet, for them and for us.

August 31st 1940 Constant fighting now daily over Kent. Saw an outstanding battle over us in clear blue sky at about 15,000 feet. A Hurricane of ours nearly fell on my wife and me; burst into flames on crashing across the road. The pilot came down safely on his parachute.

September 7th 1940 From our Church Tower, saw that great array of German bombers going north to the bombing of London. This old and massive Church tower of ours gives one the most satisfying sense of stability and assurance. Built 500 years ago, in 1450, it has seen the Spanish Armada pass: has survived Napoleon's threat of invasion across the Channel; outlived the first World War; and maybe, will yet outlast this. Please God it may be so.

September 9th 1940 This silence from London is terrible. Though only 50 miles away it has been impossible to get in touch with it since the bombing. Wire, 'phone and post all silent. Can get no news of my brother and his wife, nor of the boys' parents.

September 11th 1940 A rumour that the boys' father is dead. I cannot trace its source at all. Have not told the kiddies.

September 14th 1940 At last, news from London. My people safe. But the boys' father is gone: buried under tons of rubble in his office. We shall now have to break the news to them. Poor kids! What a hellish business it all is.

September 16th 1940 Kent is littered with German planes. They lost 185 yesterday! There are at least 15 down in this district.

October 12th 1940 A tragic day. A bomb fell just outside a girls' school, to which I have been a doctor for at least 15 years. 56 girls there. Ripped off the whole front of the building: terrible chaos within. Got out the dead and wounded. Oh, these pitiful children of ours! How long, Oh Lord, how long!

Strange how the sight of a wrecked home affects one. There is something faintly obscene, indecent, about a gracious old timbered house like this school, torn open, its inner privacies exposed in utter disarray. How real the Psalms become in these days – "thy servants think upon her stones, and it pitieth them to see her in the dust."

These books must take their chance. Impossible to guard against bombs which smash houses like that. But I'd be sorry for such lovely things to be destroyed. Better if they had been safe at St Peter's.

March 1st 1941 Had a pretty quiet winter here, only occasional bombs. London and the cities been the main target. But seem to be getting busy again now.

May 8th 1941 Seldom any over in daylight nowadays; but this morning saw three intercepted by three of our fighters and shot down.

September 1943 Once again, as I am writing, we are being raided. A pitch-dark night, spitting with rain; and a lot of incendiaries have fallen a mile or two north of us. From time to time, a heavy bomb makes the house shake and vibrate. Should we get incendiaries and burn, I hope to have time to save these books – though they are weighty. It were tragic if these glorious volumes, which should be a joy to unborn generations, were to perish in so futile a manner. Perhaps Tenterden, only a dozen miles from the channel, and a bare five minutes from France, wasn't the safest place to have them!

January 22nd 1944 A wild night. The incessant drone of heavy bombers, the whine of night-fighters, searchlights by scores, the flickers of gunfire, the sudden flash of bombs – all this for two hours, since 9 pm. Two planes fell in flames, to the east. About 10 pm poor little Smarden, our next village, got a perfect deluge of incendiaries.

February 24th 1944 A quaint experience. We were in our Cinema, 9pm: and the story on the film was showing a London Hospital dealing with cases during a raid. Meanwhile, the same was happening in reality around us! One could not tell whether the drone of planes was from the film record, or from those above. However, we got one bomb near enough to shake the whole Cinema, violently – no doubt about him! Just at present, we are getting rather a lot of it. Almost every night. There have been times when we went months without a single raid. I find many people are not standing up to the strain so well as they did during the Battle of Britain, although we had a hotter time then. Five years of war, anxiety, and overwork are beginning to tell

on everyone. When this war ends, if it ever does, what a joy it will be to sleep and sleep at nights, and not care a jot for any noise!

May 1944 Things have been quieter lately, in Kent. They are supposed to be short of bombers.

June 6th 1944 This day we hear the "Second Front" has opened, and that we have got a lodgement across the Channel. At last. And now we may hope that this long, long endurance – five years – may be ended some day.

Wednesday 14th June 1944 Persistent reports that last night strange burning things were seen flying across the sky. Common talk says these are Hitler's boasted "secret weapon" – aeroplanes without pilots.

Thursday 15th June 1944 I have seen them. Last night they came tearing across the sky, pretty low, with flaming tails and making the hell of a noise. Nasty things. Look like a dagger fling hilt foremost. As Tenterden is on the direct route to London, many came slap over us. Not much chance of sleep for anyone last night.

Monday 19th June 1944 They are "flying bombs", carrying a charge of a ton of high explosive. When they go off even two or three miles from here they shake Athos like a jelly. Many have been brought down, in open country around here. The fewer, for London. - One of the devils just going tearing over. - - Gone.

Wednesday 21st June 1944 As we are right in "Bomb Alley", the direct route for London, they pass right over us. Every time one goes over we each crouch behind a piece of furniture, to save our eyes from glass. Nearly one in three of the cases I am seeing have received wounds from window glass. Some, like pincushions almost: and it takes a long time getting out.

28th June 1944 We are having a hot time of it. My windows are blown in, the (locked!) front door burst open, our ceiling crashed down. All this at midnight, in pitch dark. Thank God, none in the house was hurt.

July 19th 1944 There is little sleep these nights, in Kent. Last night I counted 8 flying bombs brought down in our neighbourhood, between 10 pm and 2 am; each shaking the whole house. Another window blown in, and a ceiling brought down, this morning.

I am seeing terrible things: too sad to put in such a book as this. Am just back from seeing an "incident" at Rolvenden – a cottage blown sky high, with two women; and the mother in the neighbouring farmhouse, with glass in her right eye; blinded. There is no complaining, here in Kent and Sussex. They just hold grimly on: it is the price of freedom.

September 3rd 1944 Our worst half-hour, before breakfast, this morning. Evidently, with our troops almost upon them, they are using up all their stock of flying bombs before surrendering. For 30 minutes between 7 and 8 o'clock this Sunday morning they passed roaring over us, and I counted during that time, fifteen brought down and exploding – an average of one every two minutes. Not having a bomb shelter, we just lay in bed (warmest place), shielding our faces from glass with books, as each passed over, or crashed. With Christ, equally safe whether He chooses it to be in this world, or the next. Further end of the street badly smashed, some 40 houses damaged. My friend Duncan, blown by blast clean through his bathroom door, which was split in two. To think the door went first, and D followed! As he wasn't much hurt.

October 1944 Thanks be to God, those evil things have passed. The tide of war has swept past us at last and since the German guns at Calais and Boulogne have fallen silent, Kent has known a great peace. Quiet nights at last.

Comment

The Library at St Peter's Collegiate say the Dr McLaren did not actually purchase the set of 8 volumes of Gould's Bird books until 5 July 1943 when he paid £435 to Henry Southeran Ltd of Sackville, St Piccadilly, London. The Library conjectures that the diary may have been initially stuck lightly in the opening blank pages of the first volume of Mammals. The two sets of books are probably worth in excess of £250,000.

Jack Gillett