



## Private James McRAE

- 1) 143 – D Squadron, 1<sup>st</sup> NSW Mounted Rifles, 2<sup>nd</sup> contingent.
- 2) 1416 – Coy Sergeant Major, 3<sup>rd</sup> Australian Commonwealth Horse

**Born:** 1877 Bathurst, NSW.

**Parents:** Donald & Elizabeth McRae, Bathurst

**Occupation:** 1) Labourer  
2) Constable - Police Force

**Enlistment Age:** 1) 24yrs & 2) 26 yrs

**Embarkation:** 1) 18 Jan 1900, Sydney,  
SS *Southern Cross*  
2) 1 Apr 1902, Sydney, "*Manhattan*"

**Fate:** 1) RTA invalided - 30 Jul 1900, SS *Karamea* & SS *Oonah*  
2) RTA 1902 – *Drayton Grange* & ?*Coolgardie*

**Medals:** Queen's South Africa Medal & 2 clasps

**Honour Boards:** Cumnock, Molong & Bathurst

### Biography:

James McRae was born in 1877, registered in Bathurst under the surname MCREA, to Elizabeth and Donald McRae. Donald McRae married Elizabeth Sturzaker at Bathurst in 1869.

Their children included:

Mary Ann b1870 d1939 (Married Henry Eastment 1892); Alexander b1873 Hartley d1942 Oberon; Donald (MCCREAGH) b1874; James (MCREA) b1877 d1914 Sydney; Alfred John b1879 d1895 Cambells River; Margaret (MCREA) b1882 d1882; Alice M b1883 d1928 (Married Albert Allen 1908); Matilda J b1886 d1886; Leopold George b1887 East Macquarie d1956 Bathurst; Pearly EM b1890 d1891; Herbert Henry b1894 d1955; Flora McRae b?; d 1954 Bathurst (Married Arthur Wilson 1894 Blayney).

Donald McRae is listed in the 1891 NSW Bathurst/Westmoreland/AA Swatchfield Census as living at Cambells River together with 9 males and 9 females. In the 1901 Census for the same district he is again listed as living at Campbell's River together with 4 males and 2 females.

*The Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal* – 6 Sep 1895, p2, reported on "the sudden death of Alfred John McRae, son of Donald McRae, of Campbell's River, who was walking about at home and suddenly dropped dead... Several months ago the lad had a fall from his horse and never quite recovered from the effects..."

James McRae moved to Cumnock around 1893 (according to a statement he made in his welcome home speech in Cumnock in 1900), when he would have been sixteen years old. He is reported in several local newspapers as playing cricket for Cumnock during 1898 and 1899. In the *Molong Express & Western District Advertiser* – 1 Oct 1898, p6, Cumnock Hospital Handicap, 150 yards, open to all comers, with a field of 9 contestants, J McRae, won 1<sup>st</sup> prize of £5. He competed in more sprint races in 1899, but did not make the finals in the two events reported on. No mention was made where James McRae was working.

*The Molong Express & Western District Advertiser* – 30 Dec 1899, p6, "Off to the War", reported James McRae, Cumnock, as being one of the men from the district who were travelling to Sydney to join the Australian soldiers to fight in South Africa.

Private James McRae was assigned number 143, 'D' Squadron, of the NSW Mounted Rifles, second contingent. The three squadrons (B, C & D) of the First NSW Mounted Rifles embarked on the transport ship *Southern Cross*, which departed Sydney on 18 Jan 1900 and arrived at Capetown on 17 Feb 1900.

The troops disembarked on 19 January, and were comprised of 20 officers, 385 sergeants and rank and file, with 404 horses and 17 carts.

The three squadrons of Mounted Infantry arrived in South Africa in time to take part, along with Antill's squadron of Mounted Rifles, in Lord Roberts' big operations for the relief of Kimberley and the capture of Bloemfontein. They were part of the brigade under Colonel Hannay which started from Orange River, marched to Ramdam, and following on the heels of General French's cavalry division, were the advance-guard of the great army after General French had branched off to Kimberley. Operations in which the squadrons were engaged in March 1900, include Poplar Grove, Dreifontein, Bloemfontein and Karee Siding. ([www.angloboerwar.com/unit-information/australian-units/386-1st-nsw-mounted-forces](http://www.angloboerwar.com/unit-information/australian-units/386-1st-nsw-mounted-forces))

*The Molong Express & Western District Advertiser* – 28 Apr 1900, p5, reported:

*"From a letter received by a friend in Cumnock, we learn that Private Walter Finch who went to South Africa with the Second Contingent, was wounded in the first engagement in which he took part... All the 'boys' who went from Molong are now together, the second contingent party having joined the first. Private C Miller had had an attack of fever, but was steadily recovering; and Private J McRae was very sick, but had not gone on the doctor's list."*

Private McRae was eventually forced to seek medical help for Enteric Fever and was invalided home along with Private Miller on the SS *Karamea* which arrived at Hobart on Thursday 26 Jul 1900. Invalided NSW troops left Hobart on the Union Company's steamer, *Oonah*, on 27 July and reached Sydney on 30 Jul 1900. They disembarked the following morning and were conveyed to Victoria Barracks, followed by entertainment in the afternoon by the military authorities on behalf of the Government.

*The Molong Express & Western District Advertiser* – 11 Aug 1900, p7, reports in great detail of a grand reception given to Privates C Miller and J McRae at Cumnock, extracts being:

*"Saturday morning last [4 July], Privates C Miller and J McRae returned to Cumnock from South Africa, invalided home from the war through sickness. After reaching Sydney, they remained a few days at Blackheath, and then came on to Molong by mail train, where they were met by a number of friends. After breakfast, they proceeded to Cumnock in a three-horse drag, which had been driven in specially to meet them by Mr F Newmarch... A number of Cumnock people rode out to the Gap, and escorted the vehicle into Cumnock, where a large crowd had assembled to do honor to the occasion and much good fellowship prevailed..."*

*A welcome home function was held at Leary's Hall which was beautifully decorated with Union Jacks and many other flags, lines and chains of patriotic crinkled paper, white flowers, foliage and fairy lights. Across the full width of the stage, was a red banner, bearing the words 'Welcome Home'. The banquet table extended from end to end of the long hall, and was laden with a most sumptuous repast composed of the choicest substantial viands, and all the delicacies in season...*

[Many speeches were made by various Cumnock residents and songs sung.]

*Private McRae was very warmly received upon rising. He said he sincerely thanked all present, and others concerned in their welcome home. He had passed his own house to come to Cumnock for the purpose of seeing his old friends, amongst whom he had resided for seven years. In South Africa they had undergone some hardships no doubt, but did not regret that, and though he would rather have been able to remain at the war till it was over, he was glad to have reached home safely, and could thank them most sincerely for the very warm and cordial reception..."*

*The Molong Argus* - 10 Aug 1900, p4, Cumnock:

*"Privates Chris Miller and J McRae have arrived home from the war, and were officially welcomed and entertained by the citizens on Wednesday evening. McRae has brought back a number of interesting relics, viz., pom-pom shells, dum-dum, soft-nosed and Mauser bullets and cartridges, all taken from Boer laagers; also, a number of badges from the different regiments, and a box of chocolates sent by the Queen as a Christmas box to each of her soldiers engaged in the Boer War. 'Jim' thinks a lot of the latter which he has kept intact just as he received it [Queen Victoria Boer War chocolate tin as shown in the photo. Many of the soldiers kept them intact as souvenirs]. He has also a large collection of Boer coins and box of silver leaves from the palms off Table Mountain."*



On Saturday 11 August, James McRae attended a reception at the Bathurst Park Hotel, arranged by the local military forces for recently returned invalided soldiers from the South Africa War. *The Bathurst Free Press & Mining Journal* – 14 Aug 1900, p2, Private George Trevitt Entertained, reported on the event in which Private McRae is stated as having said:

*“I rise to thank you most sincerely for the reception you have given me and my comrade this evening. I have had several receptions since my return, but none more hearty than this tonight. I have met most of your Bathurst men at the front and they are a smart lot of fellows. I would not wish to find a better lot of fellows than they were. Although the discipline was very strict the Bathurst boys agreed with it splendidly. When the Bathurst boys come back I am sure there will be no ‘crimes’ against them. I am sure that the Bathurst boys endured well all the hardships and troubles through which they had to go; I have almost forgotten the troubles through which I went already. I had noticed in the Molong papers that the Bathurst people had slighted the home-coming troops, but I am now convinced to the contrary.”*

*Private McRae also spoke of his experiences at the front, laying great stress on the invaluable quality of discipline, which, he said, always won the day where large masses of troops had to be moved about with precision and order. He resumed his seat amidst cheers.”*

*The Sydney Morning Herald* – 30 Nov 1900, p5, Medals for returned soldiers:

*“Medals were last night presented by residents of Cumnock and district to the following returned soldiers: Lance-corporal Owens [Frank Owens was not present and his medal was forwarded onto him], Sergeant Denny, Privates W Finch, Chris Miller, and J McRae. Great enthusiasm was manifested.”*

*The Molong Argus* – 30 Nov 1900, p3, “Cumnock’s Recognition, Presentation of Medals for Cumnock Soldiers”, also published a detailed description of the event and a description of the medal presented to the soldiers:

*“The pendant, which was nearly an ounce in weight, was in the shape of a Maltese Cross surmounted by the British Lion. On the front was the monogram of the recipient, while on the other side was the inscription ‘Presented to — — by his Cumnock friends for his patriotic services in South Africa, 1900.’”*



James McRae was reported in the *Molong Argus* – 10 May 1901, p2, as competing at the Molong Annual Hospital Sports in the sprint race Sheffield Handicap, 130 yards and tying for second place in his heat,

James McRae, along with other members of the Molong Mounted Rifles, was presented with the Queen’s South Africa Medal at a ceremony held at Government House Grounds, Sydney, on 1<sup>st</sup> June 1901, by the Duke of Cornwall and York.

James McRae became a Probationary Police Constable, No. 7734, on 5 July 1901. Other Cumnock soldiers, Christian Miller and Frank Owen, also joined the NSW Police Force around the same time. There was a constable McRae located in Broken Hill in 1901 but there were also other Constable McRae’s working around NSW in 1901, so it is not known for sure where James McRae was first stationed.

*The Molong Argus* – 21 Feb 1902, p10, Cumnock News, reported:

*“Chris Miller, who returned from South Africa invalided some time ago, spent a few days at home amongst his friends prior to again visiting the land of the Boers... Chris informed me that his old pal, Jim McRae, was also returning to South Africa, and, with the rank of Sergeant, is on duty in Sydney at present with the Second Commonwealth Contingent, so that they will part company for a time. Let’s hope we will see them both back hale and hearty ere long.”*

James McRae enlisted with 3<sup>rd</sup> Australian Commonwealth Horses (ACH) on 29 Jan 1902 at Sydney. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Btn ACH were the first Australian troops to wear the Rising Sun badge, a design chosen for the unit by a British officer, Maj-Gen Edward Hutton, Commander-in-chief of the Australian forces during the Boer War.

James McRae’s enlistment form states he was 26yrs old, his occupation was a Police Constable, and his next of kin was his father, Donald McRae, of Bathurst. His address on enlisting was 266 Elizabeth Street, Sydney. His medical certificate stated that he was 5 feet 10 inches tall, had blue eyes, auburn hair, a fair complexion and was of the C of E religious denomination. He also stated that he had 1½ years’ military service with the NSW Mounted Rifles.

*The Australian Town & Country Journal* – 15 Mar 1902, p23, published photos and names of A, B & C companies of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Btn, ACH, but McRae's name is not listed. However, in the A squadron list, in the front row, the soldier 2<sup>nd</sup> from the right, number 93 (photo left), is listed as Sergeant McCreag, and there is no McCreag listed in Murray's Reference for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Btn, ACH. It is likely that this is a miss-spelling of McRae, and it may be James McRae, as other names mentioned near him are listed with him on p177, The Murray Reference.



Company Sergeant Major James McRae embarked with the NSW division of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Btn ACH at Sydney on the transport *Manhattan* on 1 April 1902 and arrived at Durban on 30 Apr 1902. At Durban, the battalion entrained a few days afterwards for Newcastle, where it proceeded into camp at Kitchener's Kop, in the vicinity of that town, awaiting orders to proceed to the Transvaal. (Trooper FE Bignell, 3<sup>rd</sup> Btn, ACH, wrote an interest account of the voyage on the *Manhattan* and of the Battalion's 2 days' train trip to Kitchener's Kop as published in the *Riverina Times, Hay Standard & Journal of Water Conservation* - 26 Jun 1902, p3)

Upon peace being declared on 31<sup>st</sup> May 1902, the battalion returned to Durban on 11<sup>th</sup> July and embarked on the transport the *Drayton Grange* on the following day. The bulk of the ACH, including James McRae, plus other Cumnock soldiers – Christian Miller, Charles Grimson, William Hughes, Patrick Nolan and Henry Sherringham - were all on board the *SS Drayton Grange* when it left Durban on 11 Jul 1902.

The ship was overcrowded with troopers as it had been rumoured that the *SS Drayton Grange* was the last ship returning to Australia. Due to a chain of mismanagement by both the military and civilian authorities, it was discovered once at sea that the ship was grossly overcrowded and very quickly disease broke out amongst the troops. Measles, enteric fever, influenza and pneumonia swept through the ship and totally overwhelmed the medical facilities and staff on board. Conditions were appalling and as a result five men died on board and another 12 on landing after reaching Australia. Henry Sherringham was one of the men who died of pneumonia on 12 August 1902, aged 20 years, after being transferred to Port Franklin Hospital, Melbourne.

*The Sydney Morning Herald* – 11 Aug 1902, p9, "Troops on the *Coolgardie*", reported that troops from A and B squadrons of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Btn, NSW ACH, were transhipped from the *Drayton Grange* to the *Coolgardie* at Albany to allow more accommodation on the transport. It arrived in Sydney on 11 Aug 1902.

James McRae does not appear in any local newspaper articles of soldiers returning from the Boer War in 1902. He returned to the Police force and was listed as Ordinary Constable 7734 on 1 Mar 1903, Police Gazettes. He was working in the Inverell area around 1907.

James McRae married Mary JW Bromfield at Inverell in 1908. Mary was born in Cobar to William and Mary Bromfield in 1885. Mary had previously been married to Reuben R Soden at Granville in 1890, but divorced him on the grounds of desertion, around 1896.

James McRae, No. 7734, was promoted to be a first-class constable on 1 Jan 1911. He died during an operation for a goitre at the Prince Alfred Hospital Sydney on 14 June 1914, aged 37 years. He was buried in the Presbyterian section of the Field of Mars Cemetery, North Ryde, on 19 June 1914.

Constable McRae was stationed at Lower Acacia Creek [Lower Acacia Creek is located in the Northern Tablelands on the NSW/QLD border – nearby towns are Tenterfield and Killarney] Police Station from 1910-1914, according to his obituary in the *Warwick Examiner and Times* – 20 Jun 1914, p2, Killarney. An extract states:

*"He was, as a citizen, a gentleman who was highly esteemed and respected by all classes of the community. As a public officer he was courteous and obliging, and one to beat him in the police practises it would be hard to find. In this connection he was held in high favour by his superior officers in Sydney. 'Mac,' was known to everyone to be a sport [sportsman and] a keen lover of horse flesh.."*  
*The Sydney Morning Herald* – 10 July 1914, p12, Death under ether:

*“A magisterial inquiry was held by the City coroner into the cause of death of James McRae, 37, late of the mounted police. Evidence showed that he was admitted into the Prince Alfred Hospital on May 4, suffering from goitre. The coroner found that James McRae died from failure of the heart’s action whilst under ether, properly administered, for a surgical operation.*

Two of James’ brothers served in the AIF during WW1. They were:  
 Private Leopold George McRae – 1092, 19<sup>th</sup> Battalion, enlisted 29 May 1915 and RTA 26 Sep 1917.  
 Private Herbert Henry McRae – 2773, 53<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, enlisted 28 Feb 1916 and RTA 6 Sep 1919.

It is not known when James’ father, Donald McRae died. His mother Elizabeth McRae died 7 May 1928 at Bathurst. The following report is from *The Sun*, Sydney – 8 May 1928, p19:

## BUSHRANGING DAYS

### OLD LADY'S DEATH

BATHURST, Tuesday.

Another link with the days when bushrangers roamed the Bathurst district was broken yesterday by the death of Mrs. Elizabeth Ann McRae, aged 80 years.

When Ben Hall's gang called at Dunn's Plains, near Rockley, and stuck up the residence of the Gold Commissioner, Mr. Keightly, Mrs. McRae, then a girl, was the guest of Mr. and Mrs. Keightly. She witnessed the attack by the bushrangers and the shooting of Burke, a member of the gang, by Keightly. There was a reward of £500 on Burke's head. Mrs. McRae was kept a prisoner in the house while Mrs. Keightly, accompanied by Dr. Peachy, rode to Bathurst and secured the necessary £500 ransom for her husband, whom the outlaws threatened to shoot if the money was not forthcoming.

The old lady, who had lived in the Bathurst district all her life, is survived by two daughters, Mrs. A. Wilson (Bathurst) and Mrs. H. Eastment (Balmain), and four sons, Messrs. Alex and Leo McRae (Wiseman's), Mr. Bert McRae (Bathurst), and Mr. Donald McRae (Dulwich Hill).

#### References:

Orange Remembers – Boer War 1899-1902,  
 by Heather Nicholls, 2005.  
 The Murray Reference by Colonel PL Murray -  
<http://www.bwm.org.au/site/Murray.php>  
 Australians in the Boer War, Oz-Boer Database Project –  
[http://members.pcug.org.au/~croe/ozb/oz\\_boer0.htm](http://members.pcug.org.au/~croe/ozb/oz_boer0.htm)  
 National Library of Australia – Trove newspapers  
 Ancestry.com.au

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[www.cumnocknswwarmemorials.com](http://www.cumnocknswwarmemorials.com)



**Cumnock War Memorial Gates,  
 Obley Street Cumnock.**

**The Boer War plaque was erected and unveiled for the 2017 Anzac Day commemorations in Cumnock.**

