

The University of Glasgow Story

2nd Lieutenant James Scott

Biography of 2nd Lieutenant James Scott

James Scott was born on 9th October 1887, the sixth and middle child of Gavin, a Lanarkshire farmer, and his wife Mary Waugh, whom he married in 1876. It was a remarkable family, seven of whom graduated from the University of Glasgow and all of whom did well in their chosen careers. Their father, Gavin, was a deeply religious man. His faith sprang from a strong evangelical Calvinism and the family grew up in a loving home with high expectations both morally and academically. Although the family was deeply attached to the land, there was something of a Scott 'diaspora'.

The eldest brother, Gavin, went off to work in Rangoon. Another, George, became a medical officer on the rubber and tin estates of Malaya. Bella farmed in Rhodesia. Alexander followed his brother out to Malaya after serving in France during the war. James became a mining engineer in Nairobi. It is small wonder that it was a letter-writing family. Its patriarch, Gavin, was a conscientious and prolific correspondent and it is through his letters, published by his granddaughter, Ruth Richens, that so much is preserved, not just of family history, but of the social history of Scotland in the years up to and during the Great War.

James went up to University in 1908 to study for a [BSc](#) in Pure Science. In his first year he studied Mathematics and Chemistry, and in his second, Natural Philosophy. His heart was in engineering, however, and he transferred to Engineering in 1910. He seemed to blossom academically as a result, and his name was on the prize-list no less than eight times in the two years in which he completed his degree. His first class certificates were first earned in Engineering and Geology classes, and he went on in the session 1910-1911 to excel in Metallurgical Chemistry, in which he was second equal in his class, and in Electrical Engineering and Mining. He graduated on 22nd April 1912.

After graduating, James went out to Nigeria and was employed there as a mining engineer by the Nigerian Tin Corporation. He wrote some wonderfully descriptive letters back to his father, from which Gavin concluded that life in Nigeria "*with its disease implanting mosquitoes, poisonous snakes, ferocious wild animals, and human beings*" was as dangerous for James as it was for his other son Alec, or 'Sanny', serving with the [RAMC](#) at the Front. Gavin wrote to another son that if James died out there, his death would be more to be deplored than that of Sanny. At least he would have died for king and country, whereas all that could be said for James was "*that he had staked his life on his adventure into an uncivilised part of the world, and had lost it.*" But in September 1916, James was home and about to sign up, like his brother.

James joined the Royal Engineers in October 1916. His mining engineering background was of great use to the Army. He would be a tunneller. This was a dangerous occupation, as James described it in his letters. Both sides were tunnelling, the object being to undermine and explode each other's trenches. Some of the tunnels were as much as 200 feet under. "*The blowing up of a trench,*" he wrote, "*is one of the most terrifying operations in modern war.*" In December he was commissioned as 2nd Lieutenant. In February, 1917, after extensive, often gruelling training, he was posted to France.

He was at Messines, attached to the 25th Division, when the Ridge was taken. The mines, he reported, were "*an unqualified success.*" The German fled. One of his tasks after that was to find the enemy's dugouts, clear them of dead and wounded, and make them fit for our infantry to shelter in. It was a 'grim job', but in doing it he found secret papers and plans of great value. After Messines, James had a fortnight's rest 30 miles behind the lines, though still within sound of the guns.

It was short respite. Back to work in Belgium, he wrote of the awful conditions, where men suffered ill ventilated, cramped, wet, muddy conditions. It was July 1917 and he had been on horse-burying fatigue and was asking, "*Is it worth risking casualties to men for the sake of burying horses?*" Some of the horses up the line were 'very dead' and it was work that tired out your arms from holding your nose, and you "*console yourself that there are worse things than stinks to walk through.*"

In some of his last letters to his father in July 1917, James wrote of a rest period after Messines, when the men were able to bathe in the lake and relax. He wrote of the prospect of going back 'home' up the line;

"It is curious how one's fear of and aversion to the line increases the longer one is out of it. I could well take a job in some quiet place in the back areas for the rest of the war. In the idleness of the last week I have been doing a lot of new thinking about the war. I fear it will not end as soon as I have all along assumed."

His father, Gavin, died just a month later, on 31st August 1917. James Scott, like his brother Sanny came home safe from the war. Married to Jean Dykes, he went off to become a mining engineer in Nairobi. He died in 1954.

University Connections

WWI Roll of Honour

- [View 2nd Lieutenant James Scott's entry in the First World War Roll of Honour](#)

Summary

2nd Lieutenant James Scott

Rank: 2nd Lieutenant

Regiment: Royal Field Artillery

Degree: MA

Awards: N/A

Comments: N/A

Note/Press Clipping: N/A

Photo ID: N/A

Sources

Ruth Richens (ed), *Your Loving Father, Gavin Scott: Letters from a Lanarkshire Farmer, 1911-1917*, 6 volumes. (Cambridge: Ruth Richens, 1981-1992)

University of Glasgow Registry, Faculty and General Council Records

[Comments \(0\)](#)

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