

SCOTLAND'S FIRST INTERNATIONAL TRAGEDIES

Andy Mitchell has discovered poignant memorials to two of Scotland's rugby pioneers, who both died tragically young.

The driver of the Glasgow to Hamilton train was making good time, about a mile north of Blantyre, when he saw a figure standing on the track. Frantically sounding his whistle, he cut off the steam but it was too late to stop and the locomotive ploughed into the captain of Scotland's rugby team, killing him instantly. Newspaper reports did not spare the sensitivities of their readers: 'It was found that the wheels had passed over the head and part of his body, and the brain was exposed, and he was otherwise mutilated in a shocking manner.'

It was 24 March 1876. The following day, as several thousand spectators assembled at Raeburn Place to watch Edinburgh Academicals take on their Glasgow counterparts in the highlight of the domestic season, the visitors telegraphed to say that, under the circumstances, they would rather not play. It was 'a decision which commended itself to not a few present,' according to *The Scotsman*.

The unfortunate victim was William Davie Brown. Just a year earlier, he had led out Scotland at Raeburn Place in front of a record crowd of 7,000. That scoreless draw, his final game before retirement at the tender age of 22, closed a short but glorious career which included all of the first five rugby internationals against England.

Brown's family was part of the Glasgow establishment, his father a city merchant, while his eponymous grandfather William Davie was town clerk. Like his elder brother, James Kay Brown, he was educated at Glasgow Academy, and played cricket for the Academicals, but it was as a rugby full-back that he excelled. A natural leader, he won the honour of being the first Glasgow man to captain Scotland, and effusive tributes were paid after his death: 'His skill in the football field was only equalled by his courteous manner and generally obliging disposition, which won for him the friendship of all with whom he came into contact.'

His family, understandably, put the death down as a terrible accident, although it is hard to escape the suspicion that the young man went to this remote stretch of track near Craigknowe Farm, well away from his parents' home in Hamilton, with the intention of killing himself. Why he was there will never be known. He was buried at Glasgow Cathedral in the family plot, his name added to a plain stone plaque that covers three generations but gives no hint of his sporting fame or his violent death. It gives little pause for thought to anyone visiting the crumbling cemetery.

Over in Edinburgh's Dean Cemetery, just a mile away from Murrayfield, an altogether more magnificent memorial marks the demise of another Scottish rugby pioneer. John Lisle Hall McFarlane, who was also a teenager when he played alongside Brown in the 1871 match, went on to represent Scotland in the first three internationals, and was a certainty to play in the fourth before he, too, was cut down in his prime.

Born in Jamaica, where his Edinburgh-educated surgeon father had married the daughter of an estate owner, McFarlane took his middle names from his mother's aristocratic forebears, including Baron Lisle. In the course of his education at Edinburgh Institution (the forerunner of Melville College) then Abbey Park School in St Andrews, he learned to play rugby football and developed an insatiable appetite for sport: in fact, when he left Abbey Park in the summer of 1869, he enrolled briefly at Craigmount School in Edinburgh purely to get a game in their cricket eleven.

While studying medicine at Edinburgh University, McFarlane was an outstanding all-rounder: doyen of the University rugby team, he was also a member of Wanderers, and an obvious choice as one of Scotland's forwards against England in 1871 and succeeding years. As well as his rugby caps he was University athletics champion in hurdles, long jump and sprinting, and took part in the first inter-university sports of 1871, which saw Edinburgh gain a convincing victory over Glasgow and St Andrews. In the summers he turned out for Carlton Cricket Club, where he won the prize bat for highest batting average and was club vice-captain.

Having graduated, he was working as a resident doctor at Edinburgh Royal Infirmary when tragedy struck early in 1874, a week after he scored a try against Glasgow at Partick, a match 'drawn in favour of Edinburgh' at a time when only a goal could win a match. He had played several times for Edinburgh against Glasgow since the first inter-city matches of 1872-73, in direct opposition to WD Brown. Right after the game, the Scottish Football Union committee met to choose the side to face England, and McFarlane retained his place for what would have been his fourth international.

However, the following Saturday, he captained Edinburgh University against Royal High School FP at Bonnington for what proved to be his final game. It was played in four quarters of twenty minutes each, and in the first of these he had kicked the goal that inflicted the Royal High's first defeat for two years. *The Scotsman* report said glibly that 'the match was remarkable for a number of accidents' but did not specify that late in the game McFarlane stumbled awkwardly and dislocated his right knee. It should not have been a life-threatening injury, by any means, but lying on the cold ground until he could be moved was to prove fatal.

Back home in Buccleuch Place, he developed a rheumatic fever, which in turn was aggravated by pericarditis – inflammation of the heart and chest. Meanwhile, the absence of

McFarlane was 'a serious blow' as Scotland, captained by Brown, went down to England, by a goal to a try, at Kennington Oval.

After five weeks in bed, cared for by his mother and sisters, McFarlane seemed to be making a recovery but suffered an unexpected relapse, with acute vomiting. He was rushed to the Royal Infirmary but his colleagues could not save him and on 17 March he died, aged 22. The sense of shock in Edinburgh was intense, and his funeral was attended not just by the rugby community, but also by around 400 students who walked in solemn procession from the Royal Infirmary to the Dean Cemetery. A memorial was raised by public subscription, a relief portrait of his face with his instantly recognisable sideburns, under a 12 foot stone obelisk which also commemorates his late father. Few people today visit or appreciate the significance of these memorials to our rugby pioneers, but they serve as a permanent record of two young men who helped to shape Scottish rugby.

John Lisle Hall McFarlane

Born 19 June 1851 in Montego Bay, Jamaica; died 17 March 1874 in Edinburgh.

William Davie Brown

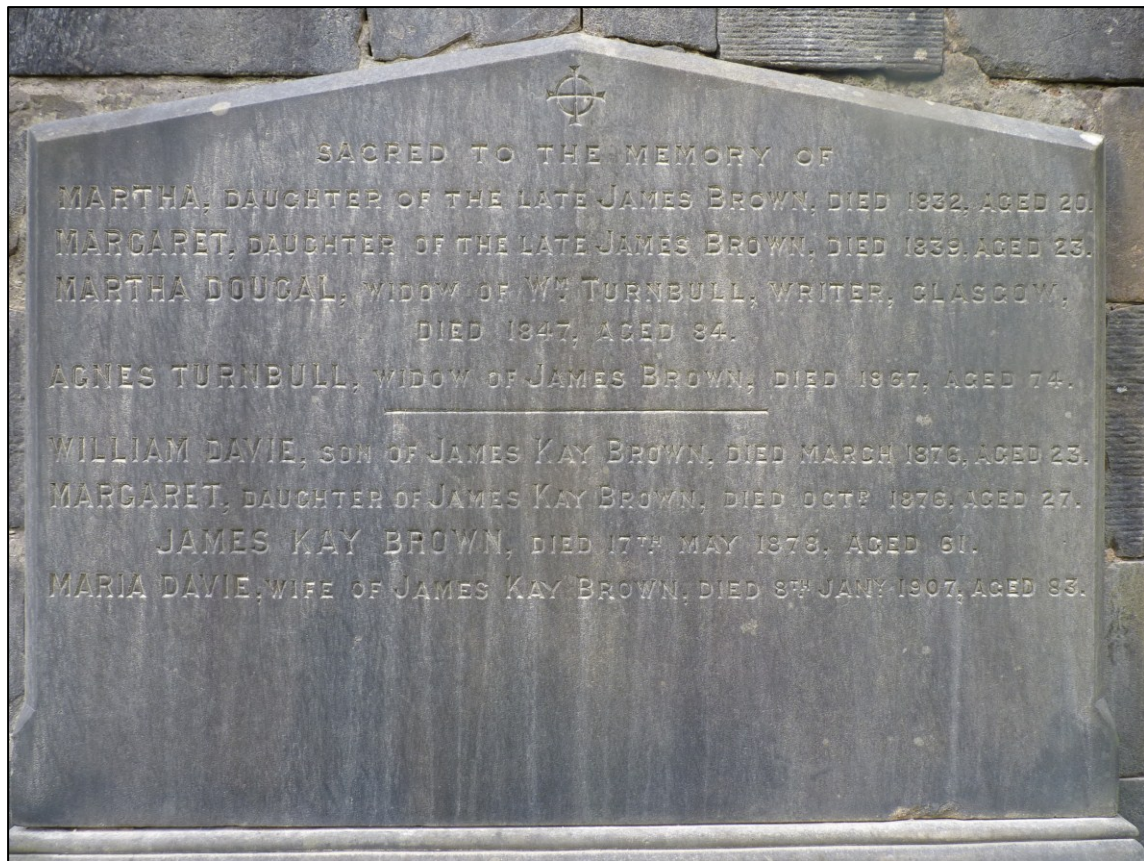
Born 29 May 1852 in Glasgow; died 24 March 1876 near Blantyre.



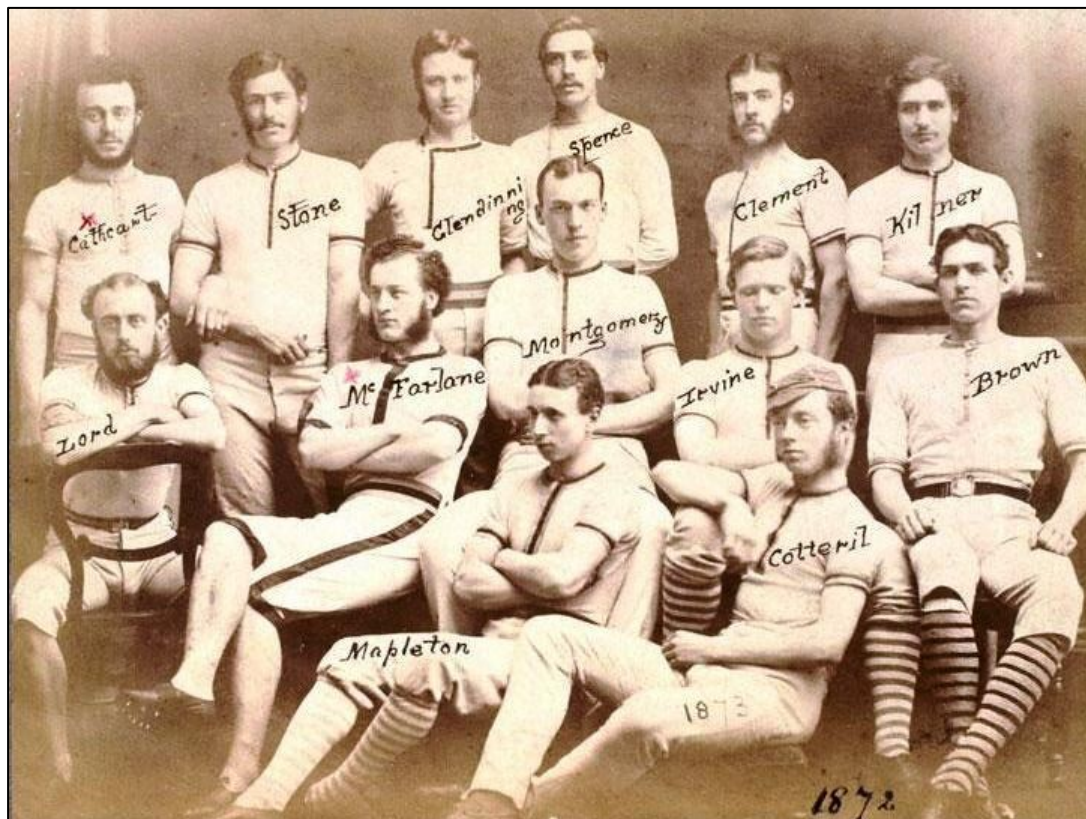
Glasgow Academicals in 1870



JLH McFarlane memorial in Edinburgh's Dean Cemetery



William Davie Brown gravestone in Glasgow Cathedral Burial Ground



Edinburgh University athletics team in 1872, including rugby internationalists J.L.H. McFarlane and R.W. Irvine