

# GOWER REMEMBERS

Lt. Col. Dr. Cluny Macpherson  
(1879-1966)

*“I have been lucky enough to devise the helmet which has proved most efficient for protecting against the gasses without at all immobilizing the men.”*

(Cluny Macpherson in a letter dated May 15, 1915)

Cluny Macpherson was born in St. John's on March 18, 1879, the eldest son of Emma Duder and Campbell Macpherson. He received his early education at the Methodist College on Long's Hill before enrolling in McGill University in Montreal to study medicine, graduating from there with an MD in 1901. While still a student he demonstrated what would become a lifelong commitment to public service by volunteering with the Royal National Mission for Deep Sea Fishermen, later the International Grenfell Association, in Labrador.



Following graduation from McGill, Macpherson spent a year at the Royal Infirmary in Edinburgh, Scotland, before returning to St. John's in 1902, where he was commissioned by the Newfoundland Government to travel to Labrador in an attempt to eradicate a smallpox epidemic. Upon completion of that task he accepted appointment as chief medical officer at the Grenfell hospital at Battle Harbour. Two years later he set up a private medical practice in St. John's but continued to serve rural communities when called upon to do so.

While practicing in St. John's in 1910 Macpherson accepted a challenge from Governor Sir Ralph Williams and helped to organize a branch of the St. John Ambulance Brigade in the city. He was instrumental in assisting in training individuals in home care and first aid, many of whom later enlisted in the Newfoundland Regiment after the outbreak of war in 1914 and became part of the Regiment's Ambulance Brigade. Macpherson, who had enlisted himself on September 21, 1914, just weeks after war was declared, became chief organizer of that brigade, which was to last for the duration of the war.

Upon joining the Regiment, Macpherson was awarded the rank of captain and was appointed Principal Medical Officer. He went overseas in March 1915, where one of the first problems he encountered was the effect of poison gas on soldiers who had little protection from it. In April 1915, while in France, and using a helmet taken from a captured German soldier, he developed a mask made of fabric that had been specially treated to absorb the poisonous chemicals: one that covered the head and shoulders, fitted with transparent eyepieces, usually

made of mica, to enable them to see. This mask went through several phases before it was transformed into the canister type mask that became standard issue for the troops in 1916.

Macpherson saw service in Gallipoli, Egypt, Salonika, France and Flanders, and was twice mentioned in dispatches before being invalided back to St. John's, a result of injuries, in October 1916. There he soon took up duties as Chief Medical Officer for the Department of Militia, which was responsible for management of the war effort. Before demobilization from the regiment in June 1919, with the rank of lieutenant-colonel, he had also seen service as a member of the British War Office's Committee on Protection against Poisonous Gases and as Newfoundland's Director of Medical Services.

Following the end of the war, Macpherson settled back into private practice, where he treated tens of thousands of patients over the next 40 years. During that time he was heavily involved in the governance of the medical profession, serving as president of the Newfoundland Medical Association and the St. John's Clinical Society and held offices in a number of related organizations. In 1949, he became a member of the Medical Council of Canada, becoming the second Newfoundlander to serve as its president (1954-1955). His community service was not limited to medical matters, but encompassed a wide array of institutions and organizations ranging from education to justice to business. In the latter role, he was for many years a director of a number of Macpherson family-owned businesses, which included the Royal Stores.

He was also an active member of Gower Street United Church, being elected by the congregation in a secret ballot as one of the first members of the Session when that new form of governance was introduced in 1929. A short time later he became a member of the Board of Stewards, also established in 1929, and served as its chair from 1933 to 1941. There is a stained glass window in his memory in the sanctuary of the church.

In recognition of his war service and his many contributions to the medical profession and to the community at large, Macpherson was named a Companion of the Order of St. Michael and St. George (1918), Fellow of the British Royal College of Surgeons (1955), Knight of Justice of the Venerable Order of St. John of Jerusalem (1955), Fellow of the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (1957) and Honorary President of the Clan Macpherson Association of Canada. On May 19, 1962 he was awarded an Honorary Doctor of Science degree by Memorial University.

Macpherson married Eleonora Thompson on September 16, 1902 in Montreal: they were the parents of Emma and Campbell, the latter serving a Lieutenant-Governor of Newfoundland from 1957 to 1963. He died at St. John's on November 16, 1966.