



## REFUGEES WELCOME HERE

# Caring for Belgian refugees in Scotland during the First World War

**Jacqueline Jenkinson** uncovers the fascinating story of how Scotland, and Glasgow in particular, responded to the influx during the First World War of Belgian refugees, thousands of whom came to Britain in order to escape German occupation of their homeland.

**G**ermany's invasion of Belgium on 4 August 1914 was swiftly followed by Britain's declaration of war against Germany to defend Belgian neutrality. Belgian civilians began a move to the coast and towards the borders with France and neutral Netherlands seeking refuge from the German military assault. Civilians fled their homes under real threat of violence – over 5,500 Belgian civilians of all ages

were killed in unprovoked attacks, in many cases in mass executions, by German troops.

The first arrivals to Britain came within days of the outbreak of the war in August and were those who made their way individually, escaping the first German advances. In September, the British government followed the lead of the Belgian government, which announced that all foreigners would be given the same assistance as native Belgians,

**Refugees leaving  
Belgium (c.1917-19)**

when secretary of the local government board Herbert Samuel announced that all Belgians in Britain would be entitled to the same relief as native Britons. The number of refugees arriving in Britain increased dramatically in October 1914 after the surrender of the garrison city of Antwerp to German troops following a week-long siege. This was followed by the rapid fall of the port of Ostend. German occupation of the whole Belgian coastline led to the



main outflow of refugees to France, the Netherlands and Britain.

In the first weeks of the war the London exhibition arenas of Alexandra Palace and Earls Court, workhouses and hotels had been set up as receiving and dispersal centres for Belgian refugees by the charitable War Refugees Committee, reliant on public support for what was seen as a just cause to help innocent victims of German wartime aggression; however, the numbers of arrivals was so great by October that the local government board decided on immediate and direct dispersal of refugees. Liverpool, Manchester and Glasgow were key areas for dispersal for refugees arriving via Dover, Folkestone and Hull.

**Belgian & Allies  
Aid League poster:**  
'Will you help these  
sufferers from the  
war to start a new  
home. Help is better  
than sympathy'  
(published in 1915  
by Avenue Press,  
London)

### Glasgow's response

During the course of the First World War, Glasgow received close to 19,000 civilian refugees. This was around eight percent of the 240,000 refugees who came to Britain. The main body of Belgian refugee arrivals in Britain came in the period from October 1914 to mid-1915, although others came later in the war, often via refugee camps in the Netherlands and France. The arrival of refugees peaked in the first three months of 1915. There was a steady outflow of men of military age going back to Belgium and adults called up for war work in Belgian factories set up in France, however refugees were moved around the Britain

for work and resettlement purposes so that Scotland had new arrivals of Belgian refugees in all the war years.

The day after the fall of Ostend, Thursday 15 October, Glasgow lord provost Thomas Dunlop held a meeting with Glasgow corporation magistrates who constituted the wartime committee for the relief of distress at which it was agreed to 'accommodate temporarily and feed about 3,000 refugees.' This group of refugees – half of them straight from Folkestone – came to Glasgow by train on Saturday 17 and Sunday 18 October. They were received and registered by staff at the Mitchell Library and at St Andrew's halls. The city's magistrates quickly became a formal committee involved with fund-raising as well as the administration of relief efforts for Belgian refugees arriving in Scotland. Magistrate Alexander Walker became the full-time treasurer and honorary secretary of the Glasgow corporation Belgian refugee committee.

In the same way that Belgian refugees were distributed around Britain, the refugees who came to Glasgow were also dispersed. Within days, refugees were settled in the homes of local families and in hotels, hostels and grand houses in Glasgow and in towns and villages around west and central Scotland such as Paisley, Rutherglen, Hamilton, Dumbarton, Helensburgh, Crieff, Falkirk and Perth and to villages such as Strahaven, Slammanan and Aberfoyle.

### Links with wider Scotland

A difficulty for those running the Glasgow corporation Belgian refugee committee was that many parts of Scotland had been designated wartime 'prohibited areas' which meant that no 'aliens' could be settled in such areas due to military considerations, in particular fear of a German invasion from mainland Europe. For Scotland this meant the whole of the east coast was designated as a prohibited area for aliens, hence Scotland's three other main



cities of Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Dundee could not house Belgian refugees. To overcome this difficulty the committee held regular mass meetings to solicit financial support from representatives of Scotland's local authorities and members of the many local Scottish refugee relief committees.

For example, in early 1915 Glasgow corporation was asked by central government to find homes for a further 5,000 refugees. In response, the corporation committee called a meeting of over 200 local authorities and local Belgian refugee committees at Glasgow city chambers. Dundee's lord provost Sir William Don pledged that his city would do all it could and had already raised £20,000. As a result of this meeting, numerous refugee homes and hostels were opened in Glasgow and financially supported by donation from east coast areas. Dundee, Edinburgh and Aberdeen and smaller towns such as Wick and Dunfermline paid for the rent, furnishing and upkeep and for the costs of feeding and clothing the refugees accommodated in these hostels situated in Glasgow.

The Glasgow corporation Belgian refugee committee also printed annual calls for donations from across Scotland. These yearly appeals for funds and in kind help were publicised in the regional press. For example, an appeal from the Glasgow corporation committee to assist 'in money or in kind' to the townsfolk of Grangemouth, a prohibited area which could house no refugees, was printed in the local press on 20 February 1915.

Another successful fund-raising effort was to send committee members around the country from the borders to the Highlands – over 70 locations were visited per year – to address public meetings and solicit funds from individual subscribers. These initiatives attracted donations ranging from £1,000 from Glasgow trades house in June 1916 to five guineas given by the trout anglers club of Edinburgh in November 1915, to 7d given by 'little Chrissie Kelly' at Christmas 1914. Regular

monthly subscriptions were also pledged from individual Scots around the country.

Assistance in kind came from church congregations and clergy. The Roman Catholic church took the lead among Christian denominations in support of the predominantly Catholic Belgian refugees. Catholic clergy and their parishioners in Glasgow and the surrounding area housed hundreds of refugees. St Patrick's, Dumbarton (under the auspices of father Hugh Kelly) accommodated 200 refugees and at St Mirin's, Paisley, Belgian priest Father Alphonsus Ooghe acted as an interpreter and took in another 200 refugees. It is likely fathers Kelly and Ooghe worked in collaboration in support of Belgian refugees since they were known to each other, having both worked in parishes in Dumbarton and Paisley. In Glasgow the convents of Notre Dame, the Little Helpers and the Little Sisters of the Poor and the convent at Dalbeth also provided accommodation to refugees.

Support was also given by other Christian denominations, for example two church of Scotland and three salvation army homes in Glasgow housed refugees. Episcopalian, congregationalist and baptist congregations also made financial donations to the Glasgow corporation Belgian refugee committee. In central Scotland, three church of Scotland and united free church presbyteries (Bathgate, Linlithgow and Falkirk) formed the churches' refugee committee, with the intention of preparing houses for refugees. By March 1916 the committee had provided seventeen houses occupied by 60 Belgian refugees in the village of Slammanann (around five miles from Falkirk). By war's end they had accommodated 83 refugees at Slamannan and 64 in Cumbernauld.

There were also regular donations by companies, including Scottish banks, which placed collection sheets in their branches, from university students, including St Andrews students' union, and from gentry such as the duchess of Sutherland, who

gave £5. Meanwhile trades unions donated large regular sums, for example the Lanarkshire miners' county union gave two amounts of £180 and £87 in December 1915, while the national union of Scottish mineworkers in Dunfermline gave over £130 a month earlier.

The Glasgow corporation committee also followed the conventional charitable route by setting up a volunteer ladies' committee which organised regular fund-raising events including flag days, music and sporting festivals and sales of lace work made by refugees. There was also a scheme introduced in March 1915 for Scottish school children to give regular weekly donations via a little pledge card to increase funds. By May, over £1,700 was raised through the collection card scheme

*The Refugee by*  
**Norah Neilson Gray**  
(1882-1931)



including donations amounting to almost £100 from the pupils at schools in Aberdeenshire, Ayrshire and Edinburgh. These activities helped meet the Glasgow corporation committee's estimated running costs of £1,000 per week (£87,000 in today's values when the mid-point war year of 1916 is selected).

Substantial funds were raised at all levels of society in Scotland to support Belgian refugees. By the end of the war the Glasgow corporation committee had raised £208,000 (the equivalent of £12.3 m today) and expended £193,000 (£11.4 m). A further £170,000 (£10 m) was raised around the rest of Scotland via the hundreds of local Belgian committees which supported refugees settled in their areas, although any shortfall in their funding arrangements was offset by the Glasgow committee in much the same way as the local government board did for local Belgian refugee committees in England and Wales.

### How this differs from elsewhere

The Glasgow and wider Scottish response is unique in that, as just indicated, all the costs of supporting and housing the refugees living in Scotland were raised by donation within Scotland. Elsewhere in Britain funding came from central government via the local government board (LGB) which made payments to cover all the costs of the central war refugees committee and its local committees. The war refugees committee was the largest charitable organisation providing housing and support for Belgian refugees. Its activities and workforce were taken over by the local government board as numbers of Belgian refugees coming to Britain increased by autumn 1914.

In December 1914 the LGB formally acknowledged the Glasgow corporation Belgian refugee committee as the Scottish advisory committee. This too was a unique arrangement. By this time the LGB was directly responsible for Belgian relief

**Departure of first contingent of Scottish Belgian Refugees to Belgium on SS *Khyber* from Hull, 16 December 1918**



in England and Wales, while in Ireland these arrangements were conducted by the Irish LGB. However, the Scottish LGB which had devolved control over poor law and health matters did not play an equivalent role; that responsibility was taken by the Glasgow corporation committee.

The Glasgow/Scottish response was different to elsewhere in part because of the municipal pride of Glasgow corporation and the wider population living in the 'second city of empire', who felt a sense of obligation to make a national contribution to the war effort. Also, Glasgow corporation was used to working autonomously and had pioneered many local welfare reforms since the late 19th century to try to tackle the impure water supply, the overcrowding, and the poor standards of housing for Glasgow's citizens.

Glasgow corporation proved adept at harnessing nationwide Scottish support for its efforts via national appeals, local visits and an unrelenting drive for subscriptions running in parallel with a programme of one-off events. This activity was combined with the pride felt by fundraisers throughout the Scottish population that they were able to support Belgian refugees without looking to central government for assistance. Overarching this was the belief (a common factor around Britain) that supporting the Belgian refugees who fled to Britain following the German

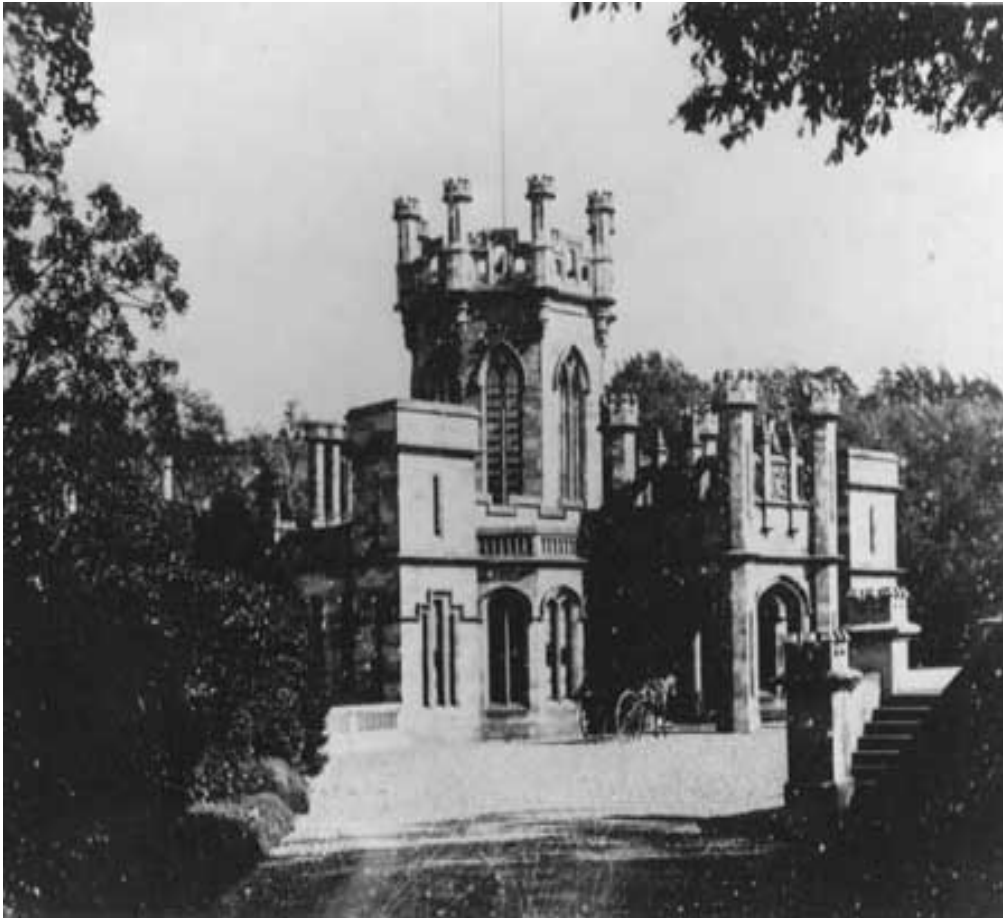
invasion of their neutral homeland was a moral, just cause.

### Who were the refugees?

Glasgow was the only sizeable reception area outside England with close to 20,000 refugees (eight per cent of Britain's Belgian refugee population). 4,500 (two per cent) lived in Wales and 3,000 (1.25 per cent) in Ireland, while around 210,000 (around 88 per cent) of all Belgian refugees settled in England. The government created a centralised system for registering Belgian refugees in November 1914 and it is from this registration process that the figure of around 240,000 refugees living in Britain is obtained. The Glasgow corporation Belgian refugee committee maintained registration records which survive in part for 1914 and early 1915 in Glasgow city archives and have been digitised, allowing some analysis to be made of the general make-up of the Scottish Belgian refugee population.

The Glasgow registers recorded 8,238 refugees in 1914/15. Of these, there were 4,515 males and 3,708 females (there were fifteen incomplete records). There were 2,209 children aged under sixteen, with roughly equal numbers of girls and boys. Refugees' ages on arrival ranged from one to 86, with an average age of 26. The majority of refugees were single, 4,609 (however this includes children), 3,391 were married, and a further 170 were





widowed. Most refugees who settled in Scotland came from predominantly urban areas.

The three most common occupations among refugees on arrival in Scotland were clerk (95 male and nineteen female), fitter and labourer. The Glasgow registers also recorded significant numbers of skilled workers among the refugees including turners, engineers and cabinet-makers. Fisherman and farmer were also among the most common male occupations. The most common employment type recorded by Belgian women on arrival in Scotland was in domestic service. There were also 32 nuns, eight priests and two pastors.

### Welcoming refugees

Belgian refugees in Scotland were warmly received and well treated. For example, a group of 250 refugees was given a hearty breakfast, a formal reception and a pipe band welcome on their arrival in Glasgow on 5 January 1915. However, the same report which recorded this event wryly noted that the

corporation committee's work was complicated when people who had accepted responsibility of caring for families 'became tired of their guests and handed them back'.

Schooling for Belgian refugee children was swiftly arranged following the increase in arrivals from mid-October 1914. The Glasgow corporation school board made its first enquiry into arrangements for Belgian refugee children on 10 November 1914 and within six weeks reported all Belgian children were now being schooled, with the majority in voluntary schools (privately-funded Catholic schools which were not supported from the rates). Belgian refugee parents were also able to request places at local (non-denominational) publicly-funded board schools through written application.

The Glasgow school board further resolved that no fees were to be charged for Belgian children and that where possible books were to be provided. Belgian

children were also placed at some of Glasgow's most prestigious private schools, including Allan Glen's, Glasgow high school for girls and Hutchesons' grammar. Other towns made similar education arrangements, in Paisley the Roman Catholic community set up a school for Belgian children and at Notre Dame school in Dumbarton a temporary teacher was hired in October 1914 on a salary of £4 a month to teach Belgian children.

Not all the friendly interest in Belgian refugees was of the practical kind. Artist Norah Neilson Gray (1882-1931), one of the 'Glasgow girls' and a wartime nurse in the voluntary aid detachment who served in France during the war, painted a sympathetic portrait, *The Belgian Refugee*, of an anonymous adult male refugee who fled to Scotland from Liège which is held in Glasgow's Burrell Collection.

A survey of press reporting suggests that the surge of sympathy among the general public for the plight of 'Poor little Belgium' and the refugees settled in Scotland was largely maintained throughout the war. Positive press coverage was aided by government guidance to prevent negative or inflammatory newspaper reporting through so-called 'D' notices. The first was issued in July 1916 and instructed the press not to print any stories about Belgian refugees evading either work or military service. A second D notice in October 1916

**Calderwood Castle, home to Belgian refugees supported by the town of Dunfermline**

**Belgian regimental band on a Glasgow visit outside Kirkcaldy Belgian Home, 1918**



prevented any reporting of trials involving Belgian refugees. Before that point newspaper accounts did include reference to Belgian refugees who had broken the law.

For example, in February 1916 Joseph Jolly, aged fifteen, was sentenced to three years in Wellington reformatory in Penicuik, Midlothian for stealing a number of table covers from his employer at a large wholesale warehouse in Glasgow. A member of the Glasgow Belgian refugees committee attended the trial and gave a statement on behalf of Jolly's father who was in court, to say that he supported the decision for his son to be sent to a reformatory. A third D notice in May 1918 instructed the press not to print stories describing the Belgian refugees as 'aliens' at a time of mounting xenophobia to enemy foreign nationals.

### Local Concerns about Belgian Refugees

Alongside this broad support for refugees, three areas for concern were voiced during the time of the Belgian refugees' stay. These were housing shortages; the perceived threat to wage levels from this new reserve army of labour; and the question of military enlistment.

### Housing

While some Belgian homes and hostels were maintained throughout the war, there was a move towards the settlement of refugees into private accommodation as their stay became long term. For Belgians in employment, paying rent was a sign of independence. However, concerns were raised within the broader Glasgow corporation and in the press that Belgian refugee occupation of private housing was having a negative effect on local access to housing. This was first raised in May 1915 when baillie Mason of the refugee committee reported to the corporation that about 230 houses had been given over to Belgian refugees and stated he was unaware of any complaints about the scarcity of houses being accentuated by the provision for refugees, noting all the houses taken over had been empty.

In January 1916 independent labour party leader John Wheatley, who was also a Glasgow councilor, questioned whether the Belgian refugee committee housing policy was removing 'good' housing from local residents and asked whether the committee had approached the government for

permission to erect new houses to accommodate the Belgian refugees. Baillie Smith for the committee replied that they had received no information that their policy had caused any citizen to be turned down for a house or put out of a house to accommodate refugees. By summer 1916 the committee reported that Belgian refugees were housed in over 400 properties around Glasgow; by 1917 this had risen to 700 homes.

### Employment

Early trade union and wider local concerns about the possibility that Belgian refugees could become a replacement labour force undercutting local workers was quickly addressed. On 23 October 1914 baillie McMillan, addressing a meeting of the full Glasgow corporation, noted that the Belgian refugee committee would be careful not to put refugees in trades where there were men of 'our own' idle.

The following day LGB secretary Herbert Samuel set up the Hatch committee following pressure from trade unions over this potential threat to wages. The Hatch committee reported in December 1914. The government accepted its recommendation that

**Glasgow's Mitchell Library, where the first mass arrival of Belgians was registered and welcomed**







Belgians should only be employed at the same rates of pay as native Britons and that refugees were only to be employed via labour exchanges. A general meeting of Glasgow corporation had already been informed by baillie Mason of the corporation refugee committee that Belgian refugees in employment 'located all over the country' were getting 'trade union rates of wages.'

#### *Military service*

Public unease about the presence of adult males among the refugees was first addressed in November 1914 when the LGB gave the Glasgow corporation Belgian refugee committee powers to 'deal with certain difficulties that had arisen' regarding the presence of men of military age in Glasgow. A notice produced by the committee calling on Belgian males aged eighteen to 30 in Scotland to volunteer for active service in the Belgian army prompted fifteen men to report for enrollment on the first day.

As time went on the recruitment process was formalised. The British government opened negotiations with the Belgian government in exile (under the control of king Albert

**Belgian refugees  
prepare to leave  
Ostend in a trawler  
on 16 October 1914**

I) over conscription and in March 1915 Belgian males aged eighteen to 25 were called up. In January 1916 this was extended to Belgian males aged eighteen to 41 (although this was not yet compulsory) to mirror the expanded British call-up arrangements. In July 1916 the Belgian government imposed compulsory conscription on all males aged eighteen to 41 to tie in with new British arrangements. On the back of such arrangements the government 'D' notice of July 1916 mentioned above was passed to prevent news stories being published about Belgian refugees evading military service.

#### **Repatriation and the end of support for refugees**

Once war was ended, central government acted swiftly to bring to an end the economic costs entailed in supporting Belgians with the implementation of a repatriation programme utilising plans in place since 1917. The Glasgow corporation committee's remit over Belgian refugees in Scotland extended to repatriation, albeit many refugees from around Britain headed for London at the end of the war hoping to leave more quickly via the capital.

Three main contingents of refugees numbering 2,846 left Scotland in December 1918 and January 1919. A further group quit Scotland in March 1919. Returning refugees were allowed to retain their bed, bedding and small furnishings up to a weight limit of 300 pounds. All were given a pair of boots and a set of warm underclothing for the winter departures. By April 1919 the corporation committee reported only 480 refugees remained in Scotland. Few Belgian refugees stayed on permanently after the war, with Scottish census figures showing only a small increase in Belgian residents from 137 in 1911 to 194 in 1921.

A meeting was held in April 1919 to formally signal the end of the work of the Glasgow corporation Belgian refugee committee. Herbert Samuel, former president of the local government board and home secretary, attended on behalf of the government. Samuel recognised the unique role that Glasgow and Scotland as a whole had played in supporting Belgian refugees:

*Scotland, he said was distinguished from the rest of the United Kingdom in respect that they had been able to defray the charges of maintaining the Belgian refugees without any subsistence from the government.*

In 1920 the official government *Report on the Work undertaken by the British government in the reception and care of the Belgian refugees* put it more simply: 'Scotland took a very prominent part in the reception and care of the refugees.'

Those who gave their services as organisers of Belgian refugee relief in Scotland were rewarded with official recognition in Britain and Belgium. Glasgow city assessor Alex Walker, secretary and treasurer of the corporation refugee committee, was awarded the CBE. Belgian honours were given to refugee committee members around the country including Paisley, Perth and Wick. Four ladies' committee members of the Glasgow corporation Belgian refugee committee, all wives of magistrates on the



committee, were awarded the MBE in 1920 in recognition of their work. The women were identified by their husbands' names in press coverage. Alexander Walker's wife was joined in receiving this honour by Mrs Thomas Irwin, Mrs James Stewart and Mrs Thomas McMillan.

## Conclusion

Tangible indications of the First World War Belgian refugee presence are minimal. Trees were planted in various places in Scotland by grateful Belgian refugees in gratitude to their hosts, none of which appears to have survived, although there are photographs of the plaque dedicating the 'Belgian tree' planted in Queen's park in Glasgow in 1917.

Hospital records show a similar tree was planted near the Victoria infirmary where injured Belgian soldiers were treated in autumn 1914. In April 1915 over 500 Belgian refugees then living in Paisley attended a similar tree planting ceremony at Barshaw park, in celebration of the birthday of king Albert I of Belgium. During a speech, the convener of the ceremony, Camille Berck, a widowed 62-year-old hotel keeper from Liège who appears in the Glasgow Belgian refugees' register alongside his two daughters, Therese and Anna aged 38 and 37, gave a message to the whole people

of Paisley which was reproduced on 17 April 1915 in the *Paisley and Renfrewshire Gazette*:

*We shall never forget how we have been welcomed here. The proverbial Scottish hospitality has not lost its old reputation ... We ask them to believe that we are not ungrateful and that we shall never forget them. We shall tell our children that the people of the British Isles came to the help of their parents in distress during this monstrous war.*

There was a financial legacy as a result of the fund-raising activities in support of Belgian refugees around Scotland. Treasurer Alexander Walker reported in April 1919 that the committee had raised £208,000 and expended £193,000 with the accounts yet to be closed. In January 1920, following a few months of final accounting and in keeping with the humanitarian motivations which led to the substantial donations from across Scotland in support of Belgian refugees, £5,000 was given to the Scottish branch of the save the children fund, £500 to the Serbian refugee fund, £2,000 was donated to the Anglo-Belgian union and £500 to the Belgian orphan fund. A further £5,000 was given to Scottish hospitals and charities.

Six major hospitals in Glasgow were given £500 each and £500 each was given to the lord provosts of Aberdeen, Dundee and Edinburgh to pass on to their local hospitals. A further £6,500 was dispersed over the next few months, mainly in smaller amounts to hospitals the length and breadth of Scotland. Plans for a memorial 'to commemorate the advent of the Belgian refugees in Scotland' reached a design stage but were not taken forward by the Glasgow committee.

A longer lasting legacy of the presence of Belgian refugees in the city is provided via the Belgian refugee registration records held in Glasgow city archives situated in the Mitchell library, the same building where the first mass arrivals of Belgian refugees in Scotland were received and

**Mrs Alexander Walker, Mrs Thomas Irwin; Mrs James Stewart and Mrs Thomas McMillan of the Ladies Committee of the Glasgow Corporation Belgian Refugee Committee. From the Glasgow Corporation journal, the Baillie, Glasgow City Archives**

registered in October 1914.

When war ended Belgian wartime refugees overwhelmingly left Scotland willingly to return to their liberated, war-torn homeland. Their five-year presence in Scotland, which had provoked massive press interest and occupied so much local Glasgow and national Scottish charitable fund-raising effort, was quickly forgotten. At a time when incoming refugees are given a more mixed reception by government and the general public, the history of the wartime support for Belgian refugees in Scotland is worth remembering.

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## FURTHER READING

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