**MAJOR-GENERAL SIR OLIVER NUGENT**

In an obituary which appeared in the Northern Whig on 2 June 1926, the obituarist erroneously attributed to Major Sir Charles Falls the observation that ‘As long as the 36th (Ulster) Division is remembered General Nugent’s name will be associated with it. His whole existence was centred upon it; he was intensely proud of its achievements, and jealous for its good name.’

The Whig was guilty of confusing Sir Charles Falls, the Unionist MP for Fermanagh and Tyrone and one-time officer in the Ulster Division, with his ultimately more famous son Cyril Falls, the military historian and author of the Division’s official history, who was also a former serving officer in the Division. The tribute appears in Cyril Falls’ official history of the Division.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Although the 36th (Ulster) Division is still remembered, General Nugent’s name is rarely associated with it. He is a largely forgotten figure.

Oliver Nugent was born 9 November 1860. He was the son of Major-General St George Mervyn Nugent and Emily, daughter of Rt Hon. Edward Litton, the MP for Coleraine between 1837 and 1843. The Nugents were a family long-established in Ireland. The first Nugent to settle in Ireland was Hugh de Nugent – who died in 1213 – came here with Hugh de Lacy, the first earl of Ulster. Socially and politically the Nugents were Anglo-Irish but ethnically they were Anglo-Norman.

He was educated at Harrow, and entered the Royal Munster Fusiliers in 1882, transferring to the King's Royal Rifle Corps in the following year.

His early army service was spent on the North-West Frontier of India. As a captain in he took part in the Hazara Expedition in 1891. During the following year he was involved in operations against the Isazai tribes, and in 1895 he served with the Chitral Relief Force including Malakand Pass where he was slightly wounded. At Khar he was mentioned in despatches and obtained the DSO.

In 1897-8 Nugent attended staff college where one of his fellow students was Douglas Haig.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Promotion was slow in this era: he was a captain in 1890 and in 1899 he became a major. It was also in 1899 Oliver Nugent married Catherine Percy, daughter of T. Evans Lees and Mrs Lees, of Beaucroft, Wimborne, Dorset.

Our knowledge of his military career owes a great deal to his marriage because he carried on a prodigious correspondence his wife from 1899 onwards. His marriage coincided with the outbreak of the Boer War. They discussed, as far as censorship allowed, the progress of the campaign, and his severe wounding and convalescence in a prisoner-of-war camp in Pretoria. Their correspondence continued after the end of hostilities, and follows Nugent’s career in England, Ireland and India until the outbreak of the First World War.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Placed on the half-pay list on 14 February 1914, he returned to Ireland and helped train the UVF in his native county.[[4]](#footnote-4) Nugent’s papers include material relating to the Co. Cavan regiment of the UVF, between March and June1914. They include a copy of the Cavan Volunteer Force Defence Scheme, camp orders, diary of work, list of costs and list of quotations for supplies related to a Camp of Instruction held in March 1914, a memorandum on training and an order regarding the holding of day parades.

At the outbreak of the Great War Nugent was given command of a brigade in France with the temporary rank of Brigadier-General. As the Ulster Division completed its training, Nugent took over from command from Major-General Powell.

Despite his protestant Ulster background, Nugent’s relationship with the division’s political supporters proved difficult. He was an Irish rather than an Ulster Unionist, and was not always in sympathy with the political and religious feelings of his fervently loyalist soldiers.[[5]](#footnote-5)

There are some 600 letters from Sir Oliver, covering the period in which he commanded the Ulster Division, to his wife and children, written from the Western Front, between May 1915 and April 1918 and including some thirty letters covering the period of the Somme offensive in July 1916. These letters are remarkable for their volume and regularity, which provide a daily account of life in the trenches.[[6]](#footnote-6)

On the eve of the Somme offensive Oliver Nugent, the Ulster Division’s commanding officer, wrote to Sir George Richardson, the commander of the UVF back home: ‘We could hardly have a date better calculated to inspire national traditions amongst our men of the North’.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Nugent was alluding to the fact that the postponement of the offensive for two days resulted in the Ulster Division’s first major engagement falling on the same date as the Battle of the Boyne 226 years earlier.

Nugent’s plan – unlike that of most divisional commanders – was to send men out in to no-man’s-land before zero hour where they would wait, protected by the curtain of shell-fire on the German lines, so that they were much closer to their objective when the whistle blew.

Initially Nugent, addressed his men after the opening of the Battle of the Somme with the words, ‘Men, you've done very well but you might have done better’. ‘There was a lot of murmuring in the ranks and some thought he was anything but a gentleman’.[[8]](#footnote-8) However by 5 July he had revised his opinion sufficiently to confess that he had commanded ‘the best troops in the world’.

The following Special Order of the Day was issued by:

The General Officer Commanding desires that the Division should know that in his opinion nothing finer has been done in the war than the attack by the Ulster Division on 1st July … There is nothing in the operations carried out by the Ulster Division that will not be a source of pride to all Ulstermen.

The Special Order spoke further of ‘the standard of gallantry and devotion that may be equalled, but is never likely to be surpassed’.

The Special Order paid tribute to ‘magnificent example of sublime courage and discipline which the Ulster Division has given to country’.

The Special Order concluded ‘Ulster has every reason to be proud of the service of our country. Though many of our best men have gone, the spirit which animated them remains in the Division, and will remain never die.’

Nick Perry contends that Nugent’s key contributions to the Division’s initial success were his comprehensive pre-battle training and his decision to push his leading waves into no man’s land before zero hour, so enabling then to overrun the forward German positions before they could be manned.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Nugent’s correspondence covers the Battle of Messines in June 1917, Langemarck in August 1917 and Cambrai in November 1917 and the great German offensive of March 1918. Messines was a stunning success. Of Langemarck, Nugent wrote to his wife, ‘It has been a truly terrible day. Worse than 1 July I am afraid.’[[10]](#footnote-10)

Major-General Nugent was to remain with the Division until 6 May 1918. However, before leaving the Division Nugent executed a Trust Deed in favour of Lord Dunleath and Sir Robert Kennedy, establishing a trust for the benefit of officers and men of the Division, their wives, widows, orphans or dependants.

On 7 May Nugent returned to England, preparatory to taking up his final command in India, where he commanded the Meerut Division in the Afghan War of 1919. This period too is covered in letters to Lady Nugent.

In 1920 he retired from the army. Nugent never got on well with Douglas Haig and it was widely believed at the time that Haig played a part in delaying Nugent’s knighthood which only belatedly materialised in 1921. He died on 31 May 1926.

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1. Cyril Falls, *The History of the 36th (Ulster) Division*, 244. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Nick Perry, ‘Major-General Sir Oliver Nugent’ in H.C.G. Matthews and Brian Harrison (eds), *Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), vol. 41, 261. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. www.proni.gov.uk/records/private/farcon.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Nick Perry, ‘Major-General Sir Oliver Nugent’ in H.C.G. Matthews and Brian Harrison (eds), *Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), vol. 41, 261-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Nick Perry, ‘Major-General Sir Oliver Nugent’ in H.C.G. Matthews and Brian Harrison (eds), *Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), vol. 41, 262. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. www.proni.gov.uk/records/private/farcon.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Keith Jeffery, *Ireland and the Great War* (Cambridge, 2000), 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Martin Middlebrook, *The First Day on the Somme*, 256. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Nick Perry, ‘Major-General Sir Oliver Nugent’ in H.C.G. Matthews and Brian Harrison (eds), *Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), vol. 41, 262. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Keith Jeffery, *Ireland and the Great War* (Cambridge, 2000), 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)