



SCANDAL IN HIGH PLACESⁱ

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*Researching for a book often leads one down intriguing alley ways. Indeed, this is part of the fun of research, even though the findings often cannot be incorporated in the finished work. I stumbled across this story while writing *Call to Arms*, my study of the British Army 1914-18, and thought it too good not to share with others.*

In major wars moral standards often slip and the Great War was no exception. The British Army had its scandals and not even the highest echelons escaped them. One of those who was tainted by impropriety was the Quartermaster-General for the entire war, General Sir John ('Jack') Cowans, who had always enjoyed a reputation as a 'ladies man'. Sir Sam Fay, who was Director-General of Movements and Railways during the latter part of the war, with a seat on the Army Council, recalls that he was at a meeting in the QMG's office one day, when Cowans' telephone rang when he was out of the room: 'The AG said to me: "Answer it Sam, tell her `Yes, Dear, I will be with you for lunch.'" At that moment Cowans returned, answering the telephone in the AG's exact words. Then we laughed! In some ways he was a youngster of twenty, and I believe that any pretty woman with design could twist him round her little finger.'ⁱⁱ General Thomas Battersby, who served under Cowans as Director of Equipment and Ordnance stores, also said of Cowans: 'He was, in my opinion, far too much influenced by letters and remarks of private persons of his acquaintance, principally ladies. In fact "Dear Jack" became almost a proverb in the War Office.'ⁱⁱⁱ At one point in the war Cowans' indiscretions caused him serious trouble.

The case concerned his close friendship with Mrs Mary Cornwallis-West, mother of the Duchess of Westminster and known as Patsy to her friends, and a soldier of the Royal Welsh Fusiliers. Patrick Barrett was a Sergeant in the 2nd Battalion, who had been severely wounded on 3 November 1914. He was nursed in the Duchess of Westminster's hospital at Le Touquet and then evacuated back to England in December, ending up in the 3rd London General Hospital on Wandsworth Common. In February 1915 he was sent to a small nursing home at St Asaph in North Wales. This was run by a Mr and Mrs Birch, the former a close friend of and land agent to Mrs Cornwallis-West's husband, who was also Lord Lieutenant of Denbigh. The Cornwallis-Wests moved in high circles and had influential connections. Barrett himself



was continuing to suffer from the effects of gunshot wounds to his arm and right side, as well as from shell shock, but the Birches took great care of him, to the extent that Barrett began to regard them as his surrogate parents – he was an orphan, with just one brother who was in a poor house. But Mrs Cornwallis-West also began to visit him, perhaps initially because he had been a patient in her daughter's hospital. It seems that she developed a crush on him and was keen to help him in any way she could. In particular, she felt that he should be granted a commission and approached Lt Col Henry Delmé-Radcliffe, commanding the 12th (Reserve) Bn Royal Welsh Fusiliers at nearby Kinmel Park. He had been Barrett's commanding officer in France before being sent home sick at the end of October 1914 and was well known to Mrs Cornwallis-West. Indeed, in the summer of 1915 she had approached Cowans with a request that Delmé-Radcliffe be appointed to command the Royal Welsh Fusiliers Depot at Wrexham. Cowans replied that he could not really do anything, but did go as far as inviting Delmé-Radcliffe to come and see him, although the appointment was not kept. Later, it appears that Cowans told Mrs Cornwallis-West that there was a 'black mark' against Delmé-Radcliffe's name at the War Office.

In the meantime, Mrs Cornwallis-West had spoken to Delmé-Radcliffe about Barrett and he agreed that the Sergeant was worthy of a commission, as did Mr & Mrs Birch. At Mrs Cornwallis-West's behest he wrote a letter of recommendation which was enclosed in a letter from her husband to Cowans drawing his attention to Barrett. The QMG then wrote to Delmé-Radcliffe asking him to inform him when Barrett's application for commission had been sent to Western Command. Cowans also wrote to Colonel William Cornwallis-West: 'When he [Delmé-Radcliffe] lets me know that the application has come in I will see that it is put through all right.' Patsy Cornwallis-West now made Mrs Birch, who did not know Cowans, write to the QMG as well. Barrett was passed fit for service on 19 November 1915 and his application for a commission was duly sent to Western Command for onward transmission to the War Office. Cowans monitored its progress and was able to write to Mrs Birch on 17 December that the commission was forthcoming and that Barrett would be posted to 12th Royal Welsh Fusiliers. He also saw Patsy Cornwallis-West at a dinner hosted by her daughter, the Duchess, in her London house. Cowans wrote Patsy a confirmatory note that the commission was going through, 'and now you will be good and not mention him again.' Barrett was duly given a Regular Commission in the Royal Welsh Fusiliers dated 24



December 1915. Probably at Patsy's instigation, he wrote to Cowans to thank him for his help and received a courteous reply in return. That should have ended the matter, but it did not.

It is clear that Mary Cornwallis-West wanted her reward for helping Barrett and began to bombard him with amorous letters. These also reflected the fact that she was jealous of Mrs Birch. Indeed, she intimated to Barrett that Mr Birch had a mistress in London and complained that his wife had been rude to her. Barrett realised that he was getting out of his depth, especially since he was less than half Mrs Cornwallis-West's age, and wrote her a long letter. In it he said that all he wanted to do was 'to live a good life and serve my God and King'. He did not understand why Mrs Cornwallis-West called him 'darling' and felt that he could not look her husband in the face after she had kissed him. In a subsequent letter he also defended Mr Birch against her accusation that he had a mistress. The old adage of a 'woman scorned' now took hold. The GOCinC Western Command, General Sir Henry Mackinnon, happened to stay the night at Ruthin Castle, the Cornwallis-West family seat, while on a tour of inspection. Mrs Cornwallis-West used the opportunity to complain to him about Barrett, who she said had been pursuing her, even to the extent of bursting into her bedroom. She also asserted that Barrett had written her an improper letter and asked Mackinnon to get rid of him. The General advised Mrs Cornwallis-West that she should take the matter up with Barrett's CO, Delmé-Radcliffe, and wrote out his address for her on an official envelope.

Delmé-Radcliffe was duly summoned to Ruthin Castle and Mrs Cornwallis-West gave him Barrett's letter. Delmé-Radcliffe decided that Barrett would have to be moved and arranged for him to be posted to the 3rd Royal Welsh Fusiliers at Litherland Camp. It is also clear that, from correspondence that Delmé-Radcliffe had with Mrs Cornwallis-West, that he wanted to go further: 'I will only add that I should be glad to see so ungrateful a person deprived of his commission when one considers what you have done for him.' At the time, Barrett was with a Young Officers Company at Bodelwyddan, but still under Delmé-Radcliffe's command. Yet, so much was he under Mrs Cornwallis-West's spell that he made no effort to hear Barrett's side of the story until Barrett happened to visit 12th Royal Welsh Fusiliers on other business. His CO then summoned him and told him that both General Mackinnon and the local Bishop had seen his letter to Mrs Cornwallis-West and that the Bishop was 'angry and disgusted'.



Barrett said that he had written the letter because Mrs Cornwallis-West would not leave him alone and said that he had letters from her that would explain his action. He agreed to show the letters to his commanding officer the following morning.

On Mr Birch's advice, Barrett wrote to Mrs Cornwallis-West that evening requesting her permission to show Colonel Delmé-Radcliffe her letters to him, but he also made copies and it was these he took back to Kinmel Park. This time the CO had two other officers present at the interview. Barrett explained that he had brought only copies of the letters and produced them. Delmé-Radcliffe flung them on the table without looking at them and told Barrett to destroy any letters from Mrs Cornwallis-West in his possession and quoted from the letter that Barrett had written to her. Barrett retrieved the copies and was told by the Colonel to get out of his sight. 'I wish to God that I had never seen you, I never want to see you again.'

Patrick Barrett was understandably very upset by the way in which the Colonel had treated him, especially since other officers had been present. He suffered a breakdown and the MO at Kinmel Park certified that he was unfit for duty for two months because of his previous wounds and nervous strain. The OC of the Young Officers Company forwarded this to Delmé-Radcliffe with a covering letter stating that Mrs Birch was aiming to get him to a convalescent home, but that he was too ill to be moved for the present. Delmé-Radcliffe appears to have ignored this and his Adjutant sent Barrett an order to report to the 3rd Battalion forthwith. In the meantime, Mr Birch had written to Mrs Cornwallis-West warning her that his wife was prepared to go to any lengths to ensure that Barrett's name was cleared and asking that Mrs Cornwallis-West write to Delmé-Radcliffe requesting that he take no further action. If she did not do this, Mr Birch warned, her letters to Barrett would be shown to Delmé-Radcliffe.

On receiving this letter, Mrs Cornwallis-West clearly panicked and began to bombard Sir John Cowans with letters and telegrams begging that Barrett's commission not be removed from him. In one she wrote 'if you do not clear him at once, I will never see you again.' Cowans tracked down the order for Barrett to be posted to the 3rd Battalion and wrote personally to Delmé-Radcliffe, complaining that he was being deluged by letters from Mrs Cornwallis-West and advising him to get Barrett posted to the 3rd Battalion immediately. 'It is



a mistake for any of us to mix ourselves up in other people's private affairs.' He also wrote to Mrs Cornwallis-West to tell her what was happening and said that he could do no more. 'I think all has been done that can be done by us officially – as it would never do for us to mix ourselves up in private quarrels and misunderstandings. I am very sorry, but I am sure you will understand this – I would fight for you if I had the time.' As it was, Barrett was still lying ill and so was not in a fit state to report to Litherland Camp. Worse, the Birches still considered that he had been hard done by.

On or about 11 April 1916, Mrs Birch showed the letters from Mrs Cornwallis-West to Barrett to Brigadier General Sir Owen Thomas, commanding 14th Reserve Brigade, of which Delmé-Radcliffe's battalion formed part. Thomas immediately wrote to Mackinnon, who had just left Western Command and now was Director of Recruiting at the War Office. He considered Mrs Cornwallis-West's letters 'extraordinary' and that Barrett's letter to her was 'more or less justified'. But legal action was now being pursued. Barrett was intending to sue Mackinnon and Cowans for libel, while Mrs Birch planned to sue Mrs Cornwallis-West for slander. Two weeks later Barrett, through his solicitors, applied for a Court of Inquiry. The letter was sent to both Delmé-Radcliffe and Thomas and used the grounds that Delmé-Radcliffe had acted beyond his jurisdiction in posting Barrett and had held him up to ridicule in front of other officers. It also cited a medical report stating that Barrett's health would not improve until the 'stain on his honour' had been removed. Thomas sent the papers to the new GOCinC Western Command, Sir Pitcairn Campbell, whom he had not previously alerted and to whom he did not express the view that he had given to General Mackinnon that Barrett had a case. Campbell turned down the application for a Court of Inquiry on the grounds that 'there is nothing military about the case and we must keep out of it absolutely.'

The War Office was now becoming concerned. The procedure for an officer or soldier seeking redress of grievance was clearly laid out in Sections 42 and 43 of the Army Act. An officer had a right of appeal to the Army Council, but had to go through his commanding officer, unless the latter refused to pass it on. Other Ranks had to initially go through their sub-unit commander, unless he was implicated in the grievance, in which case it would go to the CO and be dealt with by the formation commander. The fact that some were not following this procedure prompted the issue of Army Council Instruction 897 on 29 April 1916: 'Cases



have been of frequent occurrence where officers and men especially of the New Armies and TF have sought to ventilate grievances through the medium of Members of Parliament, Solicitors and third parties in general.' GOCs were to draw the attention of those under their command to the correct procedure as laid down in the two relevant sections of the Army Act. But as far as the Barrett case was concerned, it was shutting the stable door after the horse had bolted.

Sir Pitcairn Campbell's refusal to instigate an inquiry angered the Birches and at the beginning of May 1916 they both saw Sir Henry Mackinnon. Mrs Birch then had a very acrimonious interview with Sir John Cowans. The case was then taken up by Sir Arthur Markham MP, who had already been asking the Government awkward questions over the enlistment of underage soldiers. Kitchener now asked Cowans to send him an account of his part in the affair, which he did. He admitted that the Cornwallis-Wests were close friends of his and hoped that the Prime Minister and Kitchener would administer a rebuke to Mrs Birch for wasting 'officials' time' over 'differences of opinion between ladies, in which they are no way interested.' Kitchener seems to have hoped that matters could still be patched up. He instructed B B Cubitt, Assistant Secretary at the War Office, to write to Sir Pitcairn Campbell, enclosing copies of the Cornwallis-West letters to Barrett. He requested Campbell to forward the copy letters to Delmé-Radcliffe and to instruct him to read them. Should he then decide that his treatment of Barrett would have been different if he had read them in the first place, he was to tell Barrett so. The matter was to be treated as urgent.

It did not work. Delmé-Radcliffe appears to have thought that climbing down at this point would indicate that he admitted that his judgement had been at fault. In spite of Mrs Cornwallis-West's letters, he still felt that Barrett's letter to her was 'indicative of conduct unbecoming an officer holding His Majesty's Commission' and that he was within his rights to deal with the matter. There, for the moment, the matter rested.

In the meantime, another scandal had blown up, one that involved many of the characters in the Barrett case. The principal in this new matter was none other than Brigadier General Sir Owen Thomas. He had been one of the original brigade commanders of 38th (Welsh) Division and previously a keen Volunteer, who had seen active service in South Africa. However, in



September 1915 his divisional commander considered him to be lacking in military knowledge and training for command of a brigade on active service. He was therefore removed, but, after personal intercessions from Lloyd George and Lord Derby, who recalled his success in recruiting for the Welsh Army Corps, Thomas was given command of 14th Reserve Brigade. Likewise, Colonel T A Wynne-Edwards, who had been commanding the 16th Royal Welsh Fusiliers, was posted from the 38th Division because, aged sixty, he was considered too old. He was given command of the 21st (Reserve) Bn Royal Welsh Fusiliers in Thomas's brigade. The two were close friends and Thomas had a high opinion of Wynne-Edwards.

In December 1915 the Military Secretary had sent Western Command a letter stating that commanders of Reserve Brigades were to be carefully monitored and those whose standards of training were beginning to deteriorate removed. Reports on them were called for and Sir Henry Mackinnon stated that, while Sir Owen Thomas was not particularly proficient as a trainer, he recruiting ability and influence in North Wales meant that it was worth keeping him on. At the same time, Thomas himself intimated to Wynne-Edwards that command of the 13th Reserve Brigade was becoming vacant and that he himself might moved on to other things. He advised Wynne-Edwards, who was a Deputy Lieutenant for Denbighshire, to use his influence to secure a brigade command. Wynne-Edwards knew the Cornwallis-Wests and was obviously aware of their friendship with Jack Cowans. Towards the end February 1916 he wrote to Mrs Cornwallis-West asking whether her husband could put in a word for him, perhaps by writing to Cowans. Mrs Cornwallis-West had no hesitation, forwarding the letter to the Quartermaster-General with the comment that Wynne-Edwards had taught Thomas all that knew about military affairs. With Sir Pitcairn Campbell about to succeed Mackinnon at Western Command, Cowans wrote to him at Salisbury, where he was then based, enclosing the Wynne-Edwards letter with Mrs Cornwallis-West's comments on it. He stated that he knew Wynne-Edwards and considered him 'a very able man'. He went on to say: 'Any recommendation must of course come from you locally; but I think that he would be quite worthwhile your while keeping an eye on him.' He also wrote to Mrs Cornwallis-West saying that he had written to General Campbell, again praising Wynne-Edwards, but warning her that 'this is really a purely local matter, and I am afraid if I interfere that it may do him more harm than good.' In addition, he enclosed the draft of his letter to Campbell. Mrs Cornwallis-West



immediately wrote to General Campbell herself: 'Please do as General Cowans writes and keep your eye on Col Wyn[sic] Edwards. You will soon find his worth as a soldier – and *also*[sic] his influence over his men – and the Welsh men are *not* [sic] easy to manage.' She received a non-committal reply. Sir Pitcairn Campbell duly took over at Western Command on 8 March 1916 and carried out two inspections of 14th Reserve Brigade. He expressed himself as generally satisfied, although he did tell Thomas that he should concentrate on training his brigade, rather than worrying about recruiting.

On 4 April 1916 Army Council Instruction 735 was issued. It stated that officers on the active list were now becoming available for commands at home and that as they did so retired officers who had been re-employed would be relegated to the Unemployed List. Western Command was asked to comment on its Reserve brigade commanders and officers commanding the TF divisional 3rd line grouped depots as to whether they should be retained in their posts. General Campbell, after consulting his staff and reports by General Ivor Philipps, who had originally commanded 38th Division, as well as speaking to Sir Henry Mackinnon, submitted a list to HQ Home Forces giving the order in which these officers should be replaced. Sir Owen Thomas's name was at the top.

In the meantime, another of the characters from the Barrett case had appeared on the scene. On 8 April, Thomas received two telegrams from Mrs Birch, whom he had never met, saying that she needed to see him that evening. Mrs Birch told him that a 'mutual friend', whose name she would not reveal, had informed her that Mrs Cornwallis-West had written to Sir John Cowans asking that some fault be found with Thomas so that he could be relieved of his command and replaced by Wynne-Edwards. Cowans had forwarded the letter to another General, whose name Mrs Birch again refused to reveal. Thomas thanked her for the information but said that he found it difficult to believe. Even so, he may have thought back to the comment that Campbell had made to him about devoting himself to training. Then, at the end of April the GOCinC came to inspect the sanitary arrangements at Kimmel Park. Afterwards he drew Thomas aside and told him that, in accordance with ACI 735, he could expect to be replaced once a suitable officer from the Front became available. He assured him that every other Reserve Brigade commander in the Command had been similarly informed.



A week later Sir Pitcairn Campbell recommended to GHQ Home Forces that a Lt Col in the Monmouths, who had been invalided from France, should take over from Thomas when the time came to relieve him. On 14 May, Thomas went to see Campbell at Chester. He started by asking for a new qualified brigade major, since his previous one had been posted. But he then complained about his impending removal from command, stating that only he understood the very special conditions that existed in North Wales. He requested an interview with Kitchener, to which Campbell posed no objection, and asked whether Cowans had been involved in his removal, which Campbell denied. Campbell then wrote to Kitchener's Military Secretary, giving a report of the interview, saying that Owen Thomas had said that he had been specially selected by Kitchener and that since he had told a number of people about his removal the local press had been full of reports of it. In the end, Thomas did not see Kitchener, even though an interview had been arranged, because he fell ill. Even so, Kitchener became aware of the case and stated that he believed that Thomas should be retained and be given a good brigade major. GHQ Home Forces were informed on this on 22 May. It elicited a reply from Sir John French in person: 'I do not think that any Staff Officer, however good, can compensate for ignorance and incompetence on the part of a Brigadier, whose personal influence and supervision is indispensable. It will be impossible to expect a high standard of efficiency in drafts found by this Brigade unless a change is made.' It would seem that the comment on drafts came as a result of information passed by French's staff. Indeed, during the period 8 April – 10 June 1916 a survey of the drafts sent out by the five Reserve brigades in Western Command revealed that 14th Reserve Brigade had a significantly higher percentage of 'inefficients' than the others. On receipt of French's letter, Kitchener backed down. He agreed that Thomas should be relieved and found a job in recruiting. Thomas was informed, but made it clear that he was not prepared to accept any form of recruiting appointment.

On 28 June Sir Arthur Rackham and the member for Denbighshire West asked questions in the House of Commons on the replacement of Sir Owen Thomas by a 'Scotsman', even though the officer in question, Lt Col Cuthbertson, had commanded a battalion of the Monmouths in France. The Under-Secretary of State for war replied that Kitchener, who was now dead after HMS *Hampshire* had struck a mine while taking him to Russia, had never made any undertaking that the North Wales Brigade should, where possible, be officered by



Welsh speakers and that Owen Thomas had been relieved in the 'interests of efficiency.' This was as a red rag to a bull as far as Owen Thomas was concerned. In a reply to a letter from the Military Secretary broaching the subject of a recruiting post, he wrote that he did not consider the proposal serious in view of what had happened. Furthermore, 'Mr Tennant's statement in the House of Commons last Tuesday places upon me and the army of Welshmen an implication which I cannot allow to pass without a correction, as public and official as the statement in which it occurred.' He pointed out that no report on his lack of efficiency had been drawn to his attention and that he was 'compelled to ask for a Court of Inquiry'. In its reply, the War Office stated that the decision to remove him had been made by GOCinC Western Command and enclosed a copy of Sir John French's letter commenting on staff officers being unable to compensate for failings 'on the part of a Brigadier', although Sir John himself stated that this was a general comment and not directed at Thomas personally.

By now Lloyd George had taken over as Secretary of State for War, with Lord Derby as Under Secretary. In the face of repeated demands by Thomas for an inquiry, B B Cubitt sent him a letter dated 27 July on behalf of the Army Council. It stated that Sir John French's letter had been written as a result of a conversation he had had with Sir Pitcairn Campbell. Although it was normal for a report to be made in writing and a copy given to the officer concerned, in this case it was not considered necessary since Sir Pitcairn Campbell had interviewed Owen Thomas 'on more than one occasion'. Cubitt concluded his letter: 'It is hoped that you will now realise that, in consideration of your services, special steps were taken to ensure that no injustice was being done to you, and that it was only in consequence of definite opinions expressed as to your unsuitability to continue in command that it was felt necessary, in the interests of efficiency, to replace you by an officer who had had experience at the Front.' What the letter did not make clear was that Sir John French's comment on brigadiers was a general one. In addition, Thomas stated that he had had only one conversation with Campbell on the subject and inefficiency had not been mentioned. In consequence, he replied that he had no option but to press for a Court of Inquiry through the House of Commons. He also, like Barrett had done, put the matter into the hands of his solicitors. Furthermore, he went to see Sir Pitcairn Campbell and asked him whether Mrs Cornwallis-West and Sir John Cowans had conspired to have him removed and if the GOCinC had been responsible for Sir John French's apparent adverse comment on him.



Faced with pressures from both inside the House of Commons and possibly in the courts as well, Lloyd George took the unusual step of getting a bill passed through Parliament, which became law as the Army (Courts of Inquiry) Act 1916. He was able to use this to avoid more of the Army's dirty washing being aired in public, by setting up inquiries in camera. Cowans' biographers took a different view, later accusing Lloyd George of establishing secret trials.^{iv} As it was, a Court of Inquiry was established to examine both the Barrett and Thomas cases. It was headed by an elderly Field Marshal, Lord Nicholson, and had as its members the long retired Major General Lord Cheylesmore, who was better known as the Chairman of the National Rifle Association, a judge, and a Member of Parliament. The Court began taking evidence on 6 September 1916 at the Middlesex Guildhall, Westminster. It considered the Barrett case first, although Patrick Barrett himself was too ill to come to London and a doctor was deputed to take down a statement from him. Before September was out the Court had reached an interim finding and ordered Barrett to be informed of this. It was given to him by a staff officer from Western Command and read that Barrett 'entirely merited the grant of a commission to him in December 1915 and that there has been nothing in his conduct since that date which has been in any way unbecoming of an officer and a gentleman and that any censure which had been passed upon him in connection with the circumstances of this case has been wholly undeserved.' Winifred Birch reported that the news had definitely perked Barrett up. Indeed, it seems that the Director-General of Medical Services, Sir Alfred Keogh, had personally interested himself in his health and Mrs Birch sent him a number of bulletins over the next couple of months.

The full findings of both inquiries were announced in the House of Commons on 22 December 1916. Ian Macpherson, who was now Under-Secretary of State, with Lord Derby having taken over as Secretary of State when Lloyd George became Prime Minister on 7 December, made comments on the findings, which he assured members of the House would be published in full. He congratulated Barrett on his 'complete vindication' and deplored 'the illness to which his mental anxiety has contributed so much'. As for General Thomas, Macpherson expressed the hope that he would 'recognise that the action that was taken in his case was due entirely to military requirements, and not to any undue influence.' Sir Henry Mackinnon, who had now been retired because of age, was absolved of any blame, while



Colonel Delmé-Radcliffe, who had refused to put matters right where Barrett was concerned, was removed from command of his battalion. As the Court stated, he had acted `hastily, harshly and improperly. We regret to think that, under a lady of position in the county, he allowed himself to deny justice to one of his junior officers.’ The Under-Secretary of State did not mention Mrs Cornwallis-West by name and pointed out that she was outside military jurisdiction. He would ‘leave the verdict of the Court of Inquiry to stand by itself.’ The Court condemned her utterly, concluding that ‘her injudicious boasting of the power she wielded at the War Office, which was, however, confirmed to an appreciable extent by the wording of some of Sir John Cowans’ letters, was calculated to bring him and the administration of the War Office into disrepute.’ Her conduct had been ‘highly discreditable’, both in her treatment of Barrett and her untruthful evidence before the Court. ‘It appeared in the evidence before us that this lady holds positions of some importance in the county of Denbighshire in various associations of a public character for assisting in war work. In our opinion it is to be regretted that she should hold such positions.’ With regard to the Thomas case, the Court found that she had little to do with it, but ‘her intervention in military matters which do not concern her is strongly to be deprecated.’

Macpherson also did not mention the Birches in the House of Commons, but the Court had noted that some of the evidence seemed to imply that at base was the quarrel between Winifred and Patsy Cornwallis-West, and that both were as bad as each other. True, some of Winifred Birch’s accusations had been wild, especially one that Sir John Cowans had ordered Delmé-Radcliffe to post Barrett to the 3rd Royal Welsh Fusiliers so that he could be sent back to the Front. These were indiscretions, but the Court recognised that the Birches had Barrett’s interests at heart and without them the Army Council would not have obtained all the evidence in his case. Indeed, ‘taking their conduct as a whole, we think that by their action in defence of a friendless young officer they have rendered the public a notable service.’

This left Sir John Cowans. In his comments on 22 December the Under-Secretary of State did not specify the findings of the Court on him. Instead, he praised Cowans’ performance as Quartermaster-General and stated that, while Lord Derby `had no wish to protect any officer from the consequence of any action simply because of his high position, but he feels that this is not the moment, after he himself has just taken office, when the best interests of the country



would be served by not continuing to avail himself of his services.’ As it was, in the case of Lt Barrett the Court condemned Cowans’ correspondence with Mrs Cornwallis-West as ‘not merely indiscretion, but a departure from official propriety.’ Likewise, in relation to Sir Owen Thomas, Cowans should not have entered ‘into private correspondence on official questions, relating to the capacity and advancement of officers, with a lady who has nothing whatever to do with such questions.’ Cowans’ initial reaction was to offer his resignation, but he was persuaded by his friends not to do so. He was also perhaps encouraged by a leading article in *The Times* of 5 January 1917 commenting on the publication of the Court’s report: ‘In time of war the only points of importance are whether the Quartermaster-General, Sir John Cowans, was improperly influenced, and whether or not his Department is efficiently conducted. When offences come, as they are bound to come in so vast an undertaking as that in which the nation is now engaged, they should be dealt with promptly by the respective Heads of Departments and should not be inflated to a size altogether disproportionate to their real significance.’ Within the same issue was an article by Colonel Repington, the military correspondent, praising the work of Cowans’ department. Indeed, Repington believed that Lloyd George wanted to replace him by a civilian and had even offered him the post of QMG in France. Cowans was tempted, but rejected it because the Prime Minister would not put it in writing. Thus, Cowans survived and continued to prove himself a most able QMG. Yet, as late as 27 March 1918, Sir Sam Fay noted in his diary: ‘Cowans, QMG, wrote very nasty minute to Osborne [Director of Movements] because he did not get a lady friend of his out to India, contrary to instructions. This gentleman will get the push one of these days with his women friends if he is not more careful. Experience of the Cornwall West [sic] affair no caution to him apparently.’^v Cowans, however, stayed in office until the end of the war, but died shortly afterwards, not least because of exhaustion brought about by holding so great a responsibility for over four years of war.

As for some of the others involved in the Barrett and Thomas affairs, Colonel Cornwallis-West died in 1917. Although in his eighties, the disgrace that his wife had brought on the family name almost certainly accelerated his demise. She herself survived him by just a few years. Delmé-Radcliffe appears to have never got another posting and was placed on half pay in July 1918, retiring three years later. In spite of his exoneration, Patrick Barrett did not really recover. He became convinced that he would be victimised if he returned to active duty



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and this preyed on his mind. In March 1917 he applied, through his solicitors, to resign his commission for reasons of ill health through his solicitors, attaching a medical certificate stating that he was suffering from 'pronounced nervous exhaustion'. The papers were returned by the War Office because he himself had not signed the application. This he now did, with a very shaky signature, and was retired in May 1917 with the rider that he was not to be placed on the Reserve of Officers. He died in November 1935 at the relatively young age of 46.

ⁱ This article is largely drawn from WO 141/63 *Courts of Inquiry under Army (Courts of Inquiry) Act 1916 – Case of 2/Lt P Barrett and Brigadier Thomas; Questions of Undue Influence brought by certain Senior Officers and Mr Cornwallis-West* and Barrett's personal file (WO 339/50137), both found at the National Archives, Kew.

ⁱⁱ Fay, Sir Sam *The War Office at War* pp80-81 Hutchinson, London, 1937

ⁱⁱⁱ Quoted in Chapman-Huston, Maj Desmond & Rutter, Maj Owen *General Sir John Cowans GCB GCMG: The Quartermaster-General of the Great War* Vol 2 p155 Hutchinson, London, 1924

^{iv} Chapman-Huston & Rutter op cit pp147-157

^v Fay op cit p150