


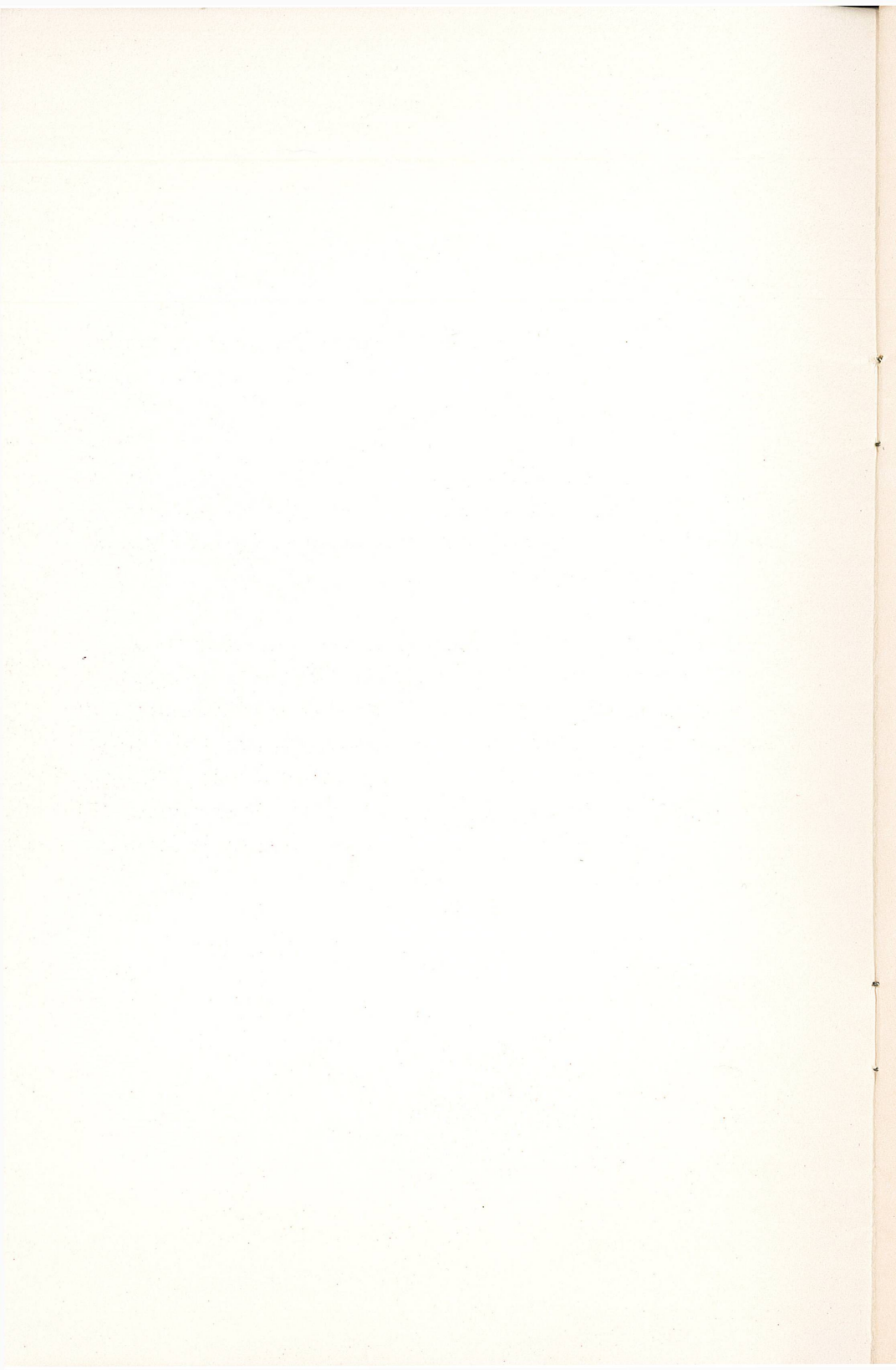
**Oxford Museum  
Bulletin No.6**



**ZORRA'S  
MEN OF MIGHT**

by  
**Herbert Milnes**

April 1976



## FOREWORD

This year of 1976 will be long remembered in Canada for this is the year we are to be honoured by the holding of the Games of Olympiad XXI in our country.

Perhaps more important to Oxford County in general, and to the Zorras in particular, this is the year in which the great tug-of-war trophies were returned for safekeeping to the Oxford Museum, after many years in exile.

It is fitting therefore, that the yellowed news items be re-examined before they are fallen to dust. The story of thirteen years of strenuous competition by the braw sons of Zorra, has been oft told in outline, but in using all the essential facts as gleaned from a multitude of old and not so old clippings, and consolidating them into a bulletin, with added photographs, will bring alive again, and recall many forgotten incidents in the deeds of Zorra's former

MEN OF MIGHT

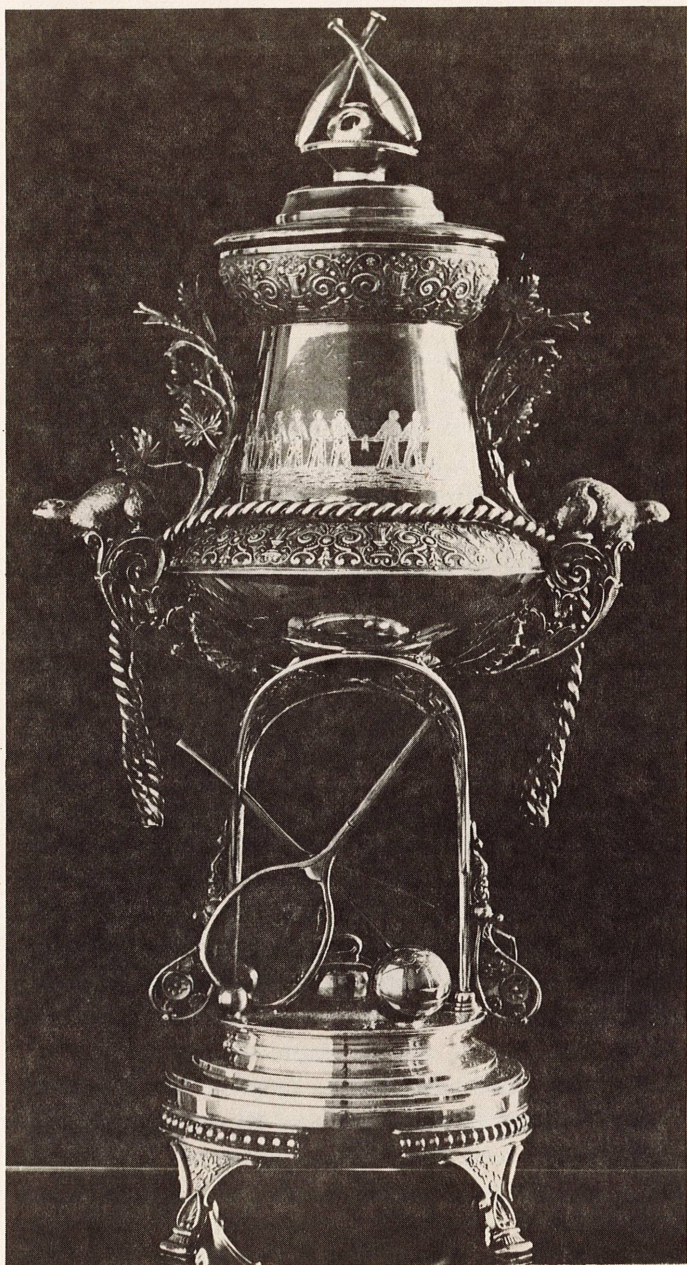
AUTOGRAPHS

Many theories have been advanced to account for the name "Zorra"; none of them proven. Outside its immediate environs, it is doubtful if more than a handful had ever heard the name, or having heard it, had the vaguest idea where the place might be situated.

But that was before the quiet and unassuming "Mighty Men of Zorra" had made the name a household word by beating the best tug-of-war teams in the world, and emerged as champions on July 4th, 1893 at Chicago World's Fair.

During the 1880's and 1890's, nearly every township in Oxford and other counties had its tug-of-war team; and a group of men who all lived within walking distance of Embro decided to form a team, more as a joke than anything. They called themselves "The Zorras" after their home township. One of their earliest victories was over the men of the neighbouring township, Nissouri, followed by wins in four successive years over Dereham's best. Their local success led them to look for fresh fields to conquer outside the county, spurred on no doubt by their gleeful fellow farmers. The original joke turned a little more serious when they met and beat the "Lucknow Giants" of Bruce County, and also the best that Brant County could produce.

Feats of strength such as tossing the caber, shot putting, throwing the hammer and tug-of-war had always been the forte of the Scottish Clans, and these descendants of the Clans were no exception. Tug-of-war was not so much a sport as an exhibition of sheer power, and in those days was not the diluted form such as is often witnessed at today's picnics, where the contestants usually end up in hilarious piles on the ground. Its seriousness is proven by its being included in the Olympic Games from 1900 until 1920. During the years towards the close of the last century the "Zorras" were willing to meet any and all, in contests of physical strength, endurance and dogged determination. Training for such events could not be specialized as such; and practices could not be undertaken other than in actual contest, for there were none in the district who could even pretend to offer any competition.



Lucknow Trophy

Yet among their members was Billy Munro, whose whip-steel muscles made him eagerly sought at community barn-raising; Ira Hummason who could carry two 115 lb. anvils at arm's length; the anchorman, Bob McIntosh who could successfully resist the pull of two heavy draught horses once he got set in position. Except for their height — all over six feet — they would not strike any observer as particularly powerful men — that is, until they were seen in action. As a matter of fact their average weight was usually twenty to twenty-five pounds lighter than their opponents.

A tug of war team consisted of five pulling members and a non-pulling captain, whose function it was to determine, during a pull, when his team should "hold" (thus taking something of a rest); and by watching the opposing team carefully for signs of weakness or error, when he should call "heave" at the opportune moment. In other words, he provided the strategy, whilst the rest of the team supplied the energy. The object of the contest was to pull the marker — a ribbon tied in the centre of the rope — towards your own side and over a line on the ground, two feet distant from a centre line.

About the time the "Zorras" had gone as far as they could in gaining victories in Canada, they fired the imagination and active co-operation of James Sutherland, himself a Zorra man and Member of Parliament for North Oxford (later to become a member of the Laurier Cabinet). He was "Royal Chief of the Order of Scottish Clans in North America", and so had wide connections with Highland groups both in the United States and Canada. He took the team under his wing personally, and having learned of a series of matches to be held in the City of Buffalo, decided that his team should have the opportunity of competing against the best in North America.

August 14th, 1888.

They did; and on the above date, swept all before them, including the teams from Buffalo and Rochester, both of which were commonly regarded as top contenders for the crown of North America. In the contest with Rochester, which was to be





Buffalo Trophy 1888

the best two out of three pulls, the first pull was so rapid that the Rochester team called, "Foul". The phlegmatic Zorras did not even bother to argue; but quietly suggested another pull, and this time there was no room for argument — the Rochesters discovered that the first pull had not been a fluke, for they were pulled right off their feet. So the doughty Zorras returned with a fat purse and received the coveted trophy, on one side of which was engraved,

"Tug of War Trophy  
Won at Buffalo  
by Team From  
Clan Sutherland C.G.S. No. 37  
Aug. 4th, 1888"

(The C.G.S. probably meant Caledonian Games Society), and on the other side,

"TEAM  
Ira Hummason. Jno. Clark.  
Robt. McLeod. Robt. McIntosh.  
Chief Smith.  
CAPTAIN  
Jas. Sutherland Esq. M.P."

After this victory, nothing more is heard of them for two years, and it has been said, jokingly perhaps — or perhaps not — that it took them that length of time to recover from the strain of competition, or more probably from the wild celebrations in Embro on their return home. These carryings-on did not please Robert McLeod, the only non-drinker on the team, and he is said to have threatened to quit the team if the rest did not mend their ways. Not that they were drunkards, simply that whisky was cheap and plentiful in those days, and was about the easiest thirst quencher on hand, particularly when a crowd of proud well-wishers wanted to show their appreciation.

Be that as it may, during those two years a mighty foe had arisen, the Chicago Highland Association team, which boasted that it could pull its own weight in wildcats. In August 1890, they challenged the Zorras for the championship, and the challenge was accepted.

August 23rd, 1890.

The Zorras journeyed to Chicago and the two teams faced each other at Elliot Park, where the Zorras lost! However two incidents occurred which smelled of skulduggery. The home team insisted that Bob McIntosh, the anchorman, be not allowed to wear the belt which he wore customarily to lessen the rope friction on his body; also a starting signal was used, to which the Zorras were unaccustomed; the result being a quick victory for Chicago. Thousands of spectators vigorously protested the decision, saying it was grossly unfair, and milled around the Zorra team, imploring them to demand a return match in Zorra's own backyard. The challenge was issued and accepted. It was originally intended to have the contest take place on October 1st, in Woodstock at the County Agricultural Exhibition, but the place and date were changed, as it was felt that the pull should be in Embro, the hub of Zorra, on October 10th, during the Embro and West Zorra Agricultural Fair.

October 10th, 1890.

A fine crowd of some four thousand people gathered at Embro, not only from Oxford County but from many other parts of Ontario and included in the audience was Sir Oliver Mowat, Premier of Ontario and representative of North Oxford constituency in the Provincial Legislature.

The pull was to be the best two out of three heats if necessary. The first pull went to the Zorras easily, in less than one minute, but the second heat was an entirely different affair. The telltale marker remained as if frozen over the centre line, hardly moving a fraction of an inch in either direction for a full twenty-five minutes, with both teams like rocks, straining and hanging on for grim death. The tension was transferred to the crowd of spectators which stood almost breathlessly, not daring to shout encouragement lest they should distract their heroes. Women closed their eyes, and possibly prayed, fearful of permanent injury to members of both teams. It looked as though it would finish a dead-heat,

with victory going to neither side.

None could say whose idea it was, but a couple of bagpipers began to play and to strut to and fro along the straining line of competitors. What was the Tune? Some say it was "The Campbells are Coming", others vote for "Cock o' the North", but no one could be certain, so tense were the nerves of all present, but 'twas a traditional air. Whatever it was, the skirl of the pipes gave new life to half dead men with their heels sunk six inches into the ground.

The marker moved perhaps an inch, then another. Very slowly it moved towards the home team; now to the foot mark; now 18" and finally past the two foot mark. A tremendous roar went up from the crowd. The Mighty Zorras had won after a battle which had lasted for thirty-five minutes, and back-slapping was the order of the day. However, both teams still lay in a semi-comatose condition on the ground for several minutes, while good samaritans with gentle and willing hands carefully pried fingers, one by one from their near death grip on the rope. It was a great victory for the Zorras, and no disgrace to the vanquished team of Chicago, for they too had proven themselves to be stout-hearted men even in defeat.

Members of the winning team each received the regular medal issued by the Agricultural Society, but on the backs, within a wreath of grain was engraved:

PRESID.  
BY  
W.Z. & E. AGL. S.  
TO  
ZORRA TUG OF WAR  
TEAM  
OCT. 10TH/90

It is not known whether a purse of money was won at the time, but in any case, the people of Zorra were a proud folk, and it is most likely that the honour of winning, and the avenging of mistreatment at Elliot Park were sufficient.

When the 1893 World's Fair was being arranged, it was announced that tug-of-war teams would be on hand from Britain, France and Belgium and Germany as well as the United States, so the contests would not be for the North American Championship only, but for that of the world. There was not even a discussion as to whether the Zorras would take part: it was a foregone conclusion.

Another Sutherland was the captain of this team, Ebenezer L. familiarly known as "Little Abe" to distinguish him from his heavier built cousin "Big Abe", yet he was hardly little, being over six feet tall. His team comprised Alex. Clark (206 lbs.), Robert McLeod (197 lbs.), Ira Hummason (199 lbs), William Munro (188 lbs.) and Bob McIntosh (215 lbs.). The members of the team were all well into their forties, except one, and he, Ira Hummason was an astounding fifty-one years of age. They certainly could not be classed as either handsome, nor as young bloods out to test their strength, yet they were so used to being known as the "Zorras", never fairly beaten, that their Scottish "thrawnness" forced them, as a matter of honour to try for the championship of the world. This, at a time when others of their age would gladly retire to the side-lines to become mere spectators.

Meanwhile, if all went well, they expected their greatest opposition to come from the Chicago Humboldts, who had been exercising for weeks past in contests with a number of powerful teams in the mid-west, and always winning.

(Here a discrepancy crops up. A clipping from the Stratford Beacon with the dateline "Chicago, July 5" says, "yesterday"; the Toronto Globe says, "It was the fourth of July . . . in a national festive setting", and other clippings give the same date. The cup is engraved "Aug 3/93"; and the Embro cairn reads "August 1893" — but this was erected only in 1939) . . . so, we give:

July 4th, 1893.

The teams from Britain, France, Germany and Belgium had been eliminated the previous day in a series of gruelling pulls, and now the anticipated time had come.

The Humboldts appeared very muscular and exuded confidence; veritable giants in their natty knee-breeches, brown shirts and blue caps. In contrast, the Zorras looked decidedly rural as they slowly entered the field of the baseball stadium, in their slouch hats and long boots. They quietly removed hats, coats and vests and stood in rough cotton shirts, ready to meet their opponents. Superficially it seemed that the contest was to be a one-sided affair.

As the contestants faced each other, ready to pick up the rope, history repeated itself when the captain of the Humboldts objected vigorously to the belt worn by the Zorra anchorman, Bob McIntosh. But the Zorra captain, "Little Abe", would not hear of discarding the belt, nor using the one which the magnanimous Humboldts offered to lend them. In the sizzling sun the argument over the anchor belt waxed fiercely and tempers began to fray. Finally it was grudgingly agreed that neither anchorman should wear a belt.

In six minutes, the first pull went to the Zorras, then the site for the second pull was shifted over to the opposite corner of the field. Here with the hot sun shining in their faces and the hard surface preventing the Zorras from digging in, the superior weight of the Humboldts showed — almost twenty-five pounds per man — as they won the pull in two minutes.

Now it was do or die; each team having won a heat. The third and deciding pull took place in front of the grandstand, on black earth, where a westering sun cast a shadow. The Zorras, as usual, fell into their famous supine position and dug their heels in; the Humboldts too, got splendidly set. A. G. Hodge, the referee, gave the signal and the pull was on. This time there were no skirling pipes to urge them on, but Zorras, straining every muscle, stirred the ribbon marker perhaps an inch, then held. A few deep breaths and another heave — a rest — another few inches gained. Then the call from "Little Abe", "Now all together boys" — a long steady pull with McIntosh taking up the slack, and suddenly the rope is in the possession of the Zorras. The contest is over amid deafening cheers as the crowd erupted onto the field. The cup, valued at



Chicago World's Fair Trophy 1893

\$200 was theirs, and the World Championship too. The time for the last pull is not recorded, everyone being too excited, and it did not matter anyway. Surrounded by a seething throng of admirers, the team left the field, with Zorra's oldest and proudest member being chaired.

The Inscription on the cup read:

"Presented by the World's Fair Scottish Assembly to the Zorra Tug of War Team on the Occasion of their Victory at the International Scottish Gathering in Chicago Entitling them to the Championship of America", on one side, whilst on the other side, "Captain E. L. Sutherland, Robt. McIntosh. Robt. McLeod, Ira Hummason, Alex. Clark, Wm. R. Munro, President James Sutherland, M.P." Then an engraving of two tug-of-war teams pulling on a cleated board, and beneath that "International Tug of War" August 3/93".

The team never pulled together again but there was no need; the impossible had been achieved.

There have been lots of other tug-of-war teams in the Zorras since that day, but even today when people speak with baited breath of THE ZORRAS, this is the team of which they speak.

At sometime all three trophies were placed in the custody of the Hon. James Sutherland and were probably kept in his house on the south-east corner of Ingersoll Avenue and Graham Street until he moved to "Altadore", where they were kept in the billiard room for all to see. When Bob McIntosh moved to Woodstock, about 1912, it was felt that they would mean far more to him, and they were transferred to his keeping at his house on Wellington Street. At one time he had the 1893 cup on show in his office at the County Courthouse. After his death and the house on Wellington Street sold, the trophies went west to Winnipeg with his daughter Mrs. Jessie Clarkson, where they remained until the end of March 1976.



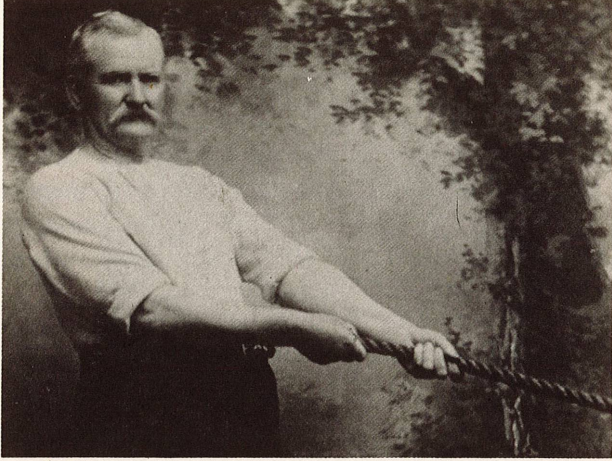


**The Zorra 1893 Champions**

Alex Clark  
Wm. R. Munro

Robt. McLeod  
E. L. Sutherland  
(Captain)

Ira Hummason  
Robt. McIntosh



**Bob McIntosh, anchorman**



**Anchorman's Belt which caused arguments**

Through enquiries started more than four years ago, and a great deal of correspondence, the wishes of many of the descendants of the team indicated that the cups should be returned to Oxford County to rest in the Oxford Museum, where they may be viewed by anyone interested in the mementoes of those famous men.

It was fitting that they should be brought home by Ross Little from Winnipeg, and presented by him on behalf of Jessie Clarkson and the other descendants of the team members to the Museum, for it was his great-uncle, the Hon. James Sutherland who had foreseen the great potential in the unassuming strength of those who brought worldwide fame to Zorra.

The presentation of the trophies took place at the Museum on March 30th, 1976 with a large attendance of direct descendants and other connections on hand to live again the glories of the past.

In 1939 the people of Zorra erected a huge cairn at the entrance to the Embro cemetery, where E. L. Sutherland and four of his team rest forever, and on it is the Gaelic inscription, DAOINE TREUNA AIR ROBH EAGAL ANTIGHEARNA, and the English, MEN OF MIGHT WHO FEARED THE LORD.

For Zorra remembers, and will ne'er forget.

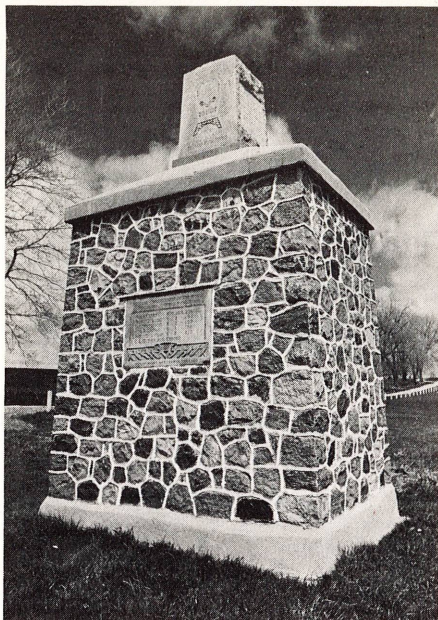
Siol na fear fearail  
Offspring of Manly Men

(Besides the three large trophies, the original belt which on two occasions was a bone of contention, two of the 1890 medals, and some original photographs are to be seen in the Oxford Museum).

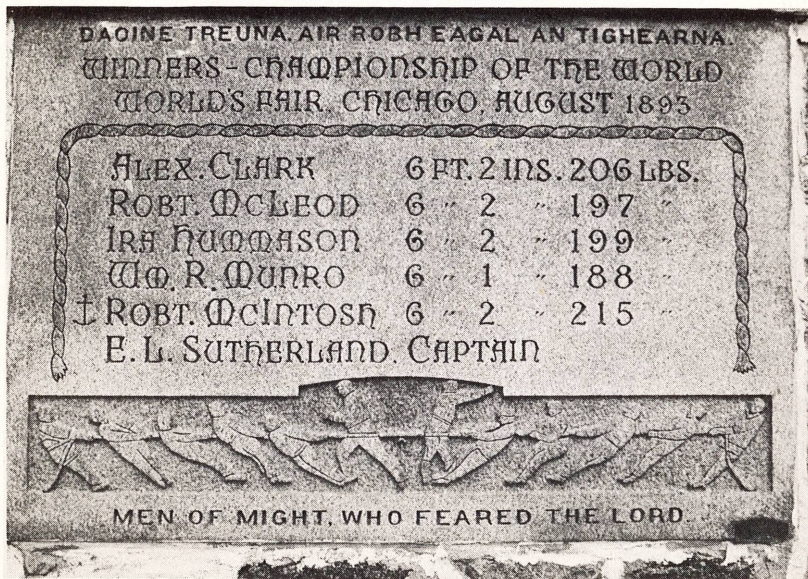
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Memorial Cairn at Embro



Gaelic inscription