

ERIC WILLIAMS



27th or 28th March 1918

1894-1918 Aged 23

**Lieutenant 18th, attached 2nd Battalion,
West Yorkshire Regiment.**

Eric Williams was the son of the Reverend Thomas Rhondda Williams from Glamorgan in South Wales. Rhondda was one of eighteen children, the son of a Calvinistic Methodist preacher. He worked underground from the ages of nine to thirteen dragging baskets of coal from the face to the tramway. He first preached in public when he was thirteen, and with the help of his elder brother (himself a Congregational Minister) Rhondda was able to go to a grammar school in Cardiff and then to Carmarthen College. He entered the ministry in Glamorgan and then from 1888 he was at Greenfield Congregational Church in Bradford. He was an inspirational speaker in both his native tongue and in English. While at Bradford he became a Christian socialist who believed that Christianity had to adapt to modern scientific and philosophical thought. He had married Ellen Henry, daughter of an estate agent in Dowlais. She bore seven children of whom three were born in Bradford. Eric was the youngest, and their third son, born on 17th June 1894. He entered Bradford Grammar School in 1908, but was not on the roll long enough to leave any trace in the records. After only a few months the family moved to Brighton where his father was appointed to Queen Square Church. Eric spent a year at Brighton College before leaving in 1910. In the 1911 census he was listed as a bank clerk in Brighton, but Eric's connections with Bradford remained strong. His elder brother Edgar worked for a wool processor there and it is likely he found his brother the position with Messrs. William Collins & Sons, topmakers, which he held in 1914. Eric lived at 29 Southfield Square in Manningham.

Eric volunteered for the Bradford Pals in December 1914, aged twenty. He served as Private 1139 in 18th Platoon 'E' Company, and before long he was made up to Lance Corporal. In June and again in August 1915 he submitted applications for a commission, and when the two Pals' battalions were despatched to Egypt in December 1915 he was training as an officer and did not accompany them. Although he was gazetted into the 2nd Pals (18/West Yorkshire), he does not appear to have joined them in France during 1916. As he is not in the photo of the battalion's officers taken at the end of April 1917 he may have been one of the nine unnamed officers who joined during June 1917 to



replace casualties suffered at Oppy Wood (3rd May 1917). He was first referred to in the Battalion's War Diary in February 1918 when the two Bradford Pals' battalions were broken up and the men distributed between other battalions. Williams was sent to the 2/West Yorkshire which he joined near Ypres on 23rd February.

A month later the whole of 8th Division was placed on five hours alert to move to the Somme valley to stem the German breakthrough which began on 21st March. On the 23rd the battalion was guarding the Somme crossing near Brie south of Peronne. Although the bridges had been demolished the Germans crossed in force and on the evening of the 25th the 2/West Yorkshire began to fall back from one position to another as the Germans worked around their flanks. There is uncertainty over the exact date of Williams' death. The War Office determined that Eric had been killed in action on the 27th March, possibly in the course of a counter-attack on the village of Rosieres. His death was initially reported to his father as having occurred on 28th March, and the War Diary assigned his death to the same day. The 2/West Yorkshire lost heavily as they withdrew to Caix under heavy bombardment, then two companies were overrun and forced to surrender. Little more than a hundred men escaped. Whichever day Eric fell on his body was lost and he has no known grave. The Reverend Williams received a telegram announcing his son's death while he was speaking on 8th April at Bradford Congregational Church to express sympathy with those who had lost sons in the war. He later refused to accept the medals issued to his son whose name is on the Pozieres Memorial.



Acknowledgements:

This photo of Eric Williams was published by Max Usher, *Never to Return: Brighton College's Fallen 1914–18* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 133. I presume that it is taken from the College memorial book. My enquiries to Brighton College have not received a reply. The account given by Max Usher does not draw on all the evidence available. I researched the family using Ancestry.com. Details of Reverend Williams' early life are from Ian Machin, 'Williams, (Thomas) Rhondda (1860-1945)', Oxford Dictionary of National Biography <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-65075?rskey=CqfkMD&result=1>> accessed 12-2-2018. Eric's Officer Personal Record is TNA WO339-40664 and is the source for his military career. Both battalion war diaries are available on Ancestry.com: 18th Battalion <https://www.ancestry.co.uk/interactive/60779/43849_2362_0-00000?pid=735122&backurl=https://search.ancestry.co.uk/cgi-bin/sse.dll?_phsrc%3DKih3241%26_phstart%3DsuccessSource%26usePUBJs%3Dtrue%26indiv%3D1%26db%3DUKWarDiariesWWI%26gss%3Dangs-d%26new%3D1%26rank%3D1%26msT%3D1%26gskw%3D2362%26MSAV%3D1%26uidh%3D6n6%26pcat%3D39%26fh%3D0%26h%3D735122%26recoff%3D%26ml_rpos%3D1&treeid=&personid=&hintid=&usePUB=true&_phsrc=Kih3241&_phstart=successSource&usePUBJs=true#?imageId=43849_2362_0-00643> (18th Battalion); 2nd Battalion <https://www.ancestry.co.uk/interactive/60779/43112_1714_0-00394?pid=489926&backurl=https://search.ancestry.co.uk/cgi-bin/sse.dll?_phsrc%3DKih3227%26_phstart%3DsuccessSource%26usePUBJs%3Dtrue%26indiv%3D1%26db%3DUKWarDiariesWWI%26gss%3Dangs-d%26new%3D1%26rank%3D1%26msT%3D1%26_F0007CF4%3DWest%2520Yorkshire%2520Regiment%26_F00088EF%3D2nd%2520Battalion%26MSAV%3D1%26uidh%3D6n6%26pcat%3D39%26fh%3D210%26h%3D489926%26recoff%3D%26fsk%3DBEK5W-47-UlgADtawAC9DK-61-%26bsk%3D%26pgoff%3D%26ml_rpos%3D211&treeid=&personid=&hintid=&usePUB=true&_phsrc=Kih3227&_phstart=successSource&usePUBJs=true>.

The account of Reverend Williams receipt of the news of his son's death is from the *Leeds Mercury* and *Sheffield Independent* for 9th April 1918 (findmypast.co.uk). His refusal to accept the medals is noted on the Medal Index Card (Ancestry.com). Eric was commemorated on the Greenfield Congregational Church memorial tablet, now in St. Andrew's United Reform Church, Little Lane, Heaton, along with 6 other O.B.s. His brothers Edgar and Harry served in the Navy and Army respectively.

This biography was researched and composed by Nick Hooper in February 2018. For further information, contact Nhooper1956@googlemail.com, or see <<http://www.bradfordgrammar.com/former-pupils/bradford-grammar-school-in-ww1/>>.