

STEPHEN LEONARD DAWSON



9th April 1917

1894-1917 Aged 22

Private 130312, 72nd Battalion Canadian Infantry (Seaforth Highlanders of Canada).

Stephen Dawson was born in Leeds, and his connection with Bradford Grammar was a short lived one. He died during the successful storming of Vimy Ridge in France by the Canadian forces. His father Leonard Dawson was the son of an architect who lived in Croydon in Surrey. After training with his father, Leonard went to Christ's College, Cambridge, and was then ordained in the Church of England. In 1888 he married Alice Blanche Blackett, a clergyman's daughter. Leonard successively held several church livings in northern England, and he also spent four years in Canada where a daughter Alice Beryl was born. Stephen was born in November 1894 while his father was Curate of Chapel Allerton, Leeds. He later returned to Yorkshire from 1902 until 1911 when he was Vicar of St. Jude's, Manningham. This was when Stephen went to BGS. He started in 1903 when he was eight, but after little more than a year his father took him from the school.

In September 1906 Stephen was sent to board at Denstone College in Staffordshire. He seems to have been happy there. We know he was admitted into the Choir, coming second in the Choir race at the 1909 sports, and he passed his lower certificates. However, when he was sixteen his father became warden of a mission station in Canada's far west, the St. George's Industrial School for Indian boys at Lytton in British Columbia. Stephen followed his family there and entered the Sixth Form at the University School, Victoria as a boarder. He enjoyed great success: at six feet in height he was an asset in the First XV's forwards; in the School Cadet Battalion he was rapidly promoted from private to Cadet-Major and commander; he was a Prefect; and he completed his matriculation for McGill University. When he left in 1913 he served in the 6th Duke of Connaught's Own Rifles, one of two Vancouver militia battalions, before he crossed into the USA to study at Washington University.

When war broke out Stephen volunteered for the Canadian Army, but he was turned down on account of his eye-sight. He resumed his studies until March 1916, when he crossed the USA to New York and



took passage for Liverpool, giving Oxford as his destination, but he may have learned that the second Vancouver battalion, the 72nd Seaforth Highlanders of Canada, were en route for Europe and he was determined to join them. In England he made his way to the Canadian transit camp at Bramshott in Hampshire where he was accepted as fit on 7th June.

The 72nd Battalion crossed the Channel in August with 4th Canadian Division. After a brief spell in the trenches near Ypres, they went to the muddy nightmare of the Somme where they provided working parties and spent a week holding Regina Trench, described as a 'sodden ditch, half-filled with water.' The welcome move to Vimy Ridge to prepare for the Spring offensive united the four Canadian divisions for the only time. The 72nd, a kilted unit, entered the trenches there on Christmas Eve 1916. Great emphasis was placed on winning the sniping battle and on raiding German positions. One raid in February was held up as a model, but another in divisional strength on 1st March cost 700 casualties. Dawson survived both.

In the attack on Vimy Ridge on Monday 9th April, Easter Day, 4th Canadian Division was on the extreme left. The 72nd Battalion sheltered in Gobron Tunnel until half an hour prior to Zero at 05.30 where they were served hot soup. However, they mustered only 400 men, no man's land was a 'vast expanse of small lakes formed by joined up shell craters', and the attackers were exposed to machine-gun fire from the left where the Germans held a knoll called the Pimple. A smoke barrage and heavy snow flurries gave some cover, but they fell behind the barrage and lost direction. Only 62 of those who attacked did not become casualties. Dawson was sheltering in a crater with three other men when a shell exploded beside them killing all four. His name is on the Vimy Memorial.



Acknowledgements:

Leonard Dawson's career is from *Cambridge University Alumni, 1261-1900*; the family history is from census, baptism, marriage records; Stephen's 1916 attestation is from *Canada, Soldiers of the First World War, 1914-1918*, and his death from *War Graves Registers: Circumstances of Death*; his movements 1915-16 are from *Canadian Passenger Lists, US Border Crossings from Canada*, and *UK Incoming Passenger Lists*. All these resources are from Ancestry.com.

Stephen's brief career at BGS is in the Annual Reports for 1903 and 1904. I am very grateful to Charlotte Horan, Alumni Co-ordinator at Denstone College, for her kind assistance in supplying me with pages from Denstone College Register and from issues of *The Denstonian* for 1908, 1909, 1911 and 1917. This led me to St. Michael's University School whose online archives (<<https://www.smus.ca/archives>>) contain photos of Dawson, together with issues of the school magazine, *The Black and Red* (I have used November 1911; March 1912; March, November 1913; June 1914; June 1917). My thanks to the Archivist Brenda Waksel for her assistance, and to SMUS for permission to use these photos.

Stephen's attestation reveals that he joined the 72nd Battalion in England. For its history, I consulted Bernard McEvoy and A. H. Finlay, *History of the 72nd Canadian Infantry Battalion Seaforth Highlanders of Canada*, (Vancouver B.C., Cowan and Brookhouse, 1920), available at <<https://archive.org/stream/72seaforthhigh00mcevuoft#page/n36/mode/1up>>, 17-48. The quotations are from this work. For the attack on Vimy Ridge, I also used Pierre Berton, *Vimy* (Penguin edition, Harmondsworth, 1987), 74, 265; Jack Sheldon and Nigel Cave, *The Battle for Vimy Ridge – 1917* (Pen and Sword, Barnsley, 2007), 115-6.

This biography was researched and composed by Nick Hooper (Nhooper1956@googlemail.com).



Left: Dawson as Lieutenant in the University School Cadet Battalion (<<https://www.smus.ca/sites/default/files/styles/>>). **Right:** First XV photo, <<https://www.smus.ca/sites/default/files/styles/480wide/public/archive/assets/photos/2010.01.045.jpg?itok=W8Z6k7RH>>. Dawson is middle row, holding the ball.

Overleaf: Dawson taken with the other prefects (<<https://www.smus.ca/sites/default/files/styles/480wide/public/archive/assets/photos/2010.01.036.jpg?itok=uX4zAuF5>>).