



Robert N.M. Bailey (1882-1917)

Robert Bailey worked as an Assistant Clerk in the Commons Committee Office. When war broke out in 1914 he enlisted into the East Riding of Yorkshire Yeomanry. It appears Bailey did not naturally adapt to army life and “became a soldier...because he thought that was his duty”¹. Even so, he served as a Lieutenant, commanding and training a platoon in preparation for conflict in the Middle East. Based in Cairo, Egypt from September 1915, he was part of the British force required to provide defence to the Suez Canal.

On 14 November 1917 his unit were called into action in Naan, north of Junction Station. As his men advanced forward, they were subject to heavy gun fire. Bailey ordered his soldiers to hold their position and in the fighting that ensued was hit by a bullet in the head. He was evacuated to Cairo hospital and initially made good progress. However, his condition deteriorated and he died from his wounds two weeks later on the 1 December 1917. His squadron leader went on to describe him as the “most popular officer in the regiment”.² His colleague in the Lords, William-Leveson Gower wrote in January 1918:

“I believe that he made a first-rate officer, although he could never think of himself as a success in that line: and he made himself beloved and respected by all sorts of people in ever rank of life...and unfortunately nothing remains for us now to be thankful the privilege of having known him”

Born in Cirencester, Bailey had won a scholarship to Eton in 1896. He was interested in history and languages, going on to read Modern languages at Magdalen College, Oxford. Bailey was active in the Working Men’s College in Camden and helped to form the St Pancras Branch in London. His belief in education as a means of improving social mobility extended to distributing leaflets throughout pubs in the most deprived areas of London.³ He also went to Canada in 1913 to work as labourer during the Harvest Season.

Like so many soldiers the horrors of the war took their toll. In a letter to Leveson-Gower, he stated “All but 2 or 3 of my old friends are gone, and I don’t seem to make new ones.”⁴ In subsequent letters he yearned for a semblance of normality and to be back home, asking Leveson-Gower to send him postcards to remind him of England.

In December 1917 following his death, Wilfred Johnston from the Clerks department wrote to his sister Helen, “your brother above all other men must have loathed the cruelties and horrors of war. I can only say this, that I am proud to have enjoyed your brother’s friendship and that I shall treasure the memory of that friendship as a very dear possession.”⁵

Robert N.M. Bailey is buried in Cairo War Memorial Cemetery, Egypt.

¹ Letter, 10 Dec. 1917 from C.P Lucas (Principal of Working Mens College) to Helen Lees-Milne (Bailey’s sister), BAI/15, 1 of 2, Parliamentary Archives

² Eton College Chronicle, 7 February 1917

³ The Highway, Vol. X, No.112, January 1918

⁴ 9 September 1916, Bailey to William Leveson-Gower, BAI/13, 3 of 3, Parliamentary Archives

⁵ 11 Dec. 1917, Wilfred Johnston to Helen Lees-Milne, BAI/15, 1 of 2, Parliamentary Archives