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S. Springer & S. Humphreys *Private Beatson's War: Life, Death and Hope on the Western Front* Pen & Sword 2009 ISBN: 9781 84884 0829

James Beatson was born in 1892, a working-class boy who did well at school, thanks to a benevolent uncle, and went into civil engineering for Edinburgh City Council. He volunteered on 19th August 1914, joining the 'Dandy Ninth', the only kilted battalion (TF) of the Royal Scots. He signed for overseas service on 28th August and, in February 1915, went with the 9th Battalion to France to join 81st Brigade, 27th Division. He was in the thick of the terrible fighting at Second Ypres, especially around St Julien. He would serve with the 27th Division until it left for Salonika, whereupon the battalion transferred to 51st (Highland) Division.

He shows that a gas attack of some sort was expected from 16th April 1915, though when first encountered it was dismissed as a sort of low level effect 'stink bomb'. When he encounters gas later in the war, he refers to it as 'a whiff of Ypres'.

He is one of the best types of educated working-class soldier, quoting in his letters from RL Stevenson, GB Shaw, Zola, Jerome K Jerome, Browning and a couple of French poets I have never heard of! He reminds us of the importance of mail and parcels from home, of the rum ration (and food in general), of the constant grip of rumour (that Holland was joining the allies, that Hindenburg himself was leading the attacks at Dickebusch in March 1915, of spies everywhere), and of how filthy French trenches were.

He copes with being under heavy enemy fire by reciting to himself verses from a popular song of the day. He hates the Kaiser and all Prussian bullies, but greatly admires the enemy front line fighters.

The diary runs to December 1915. There was a second volume but it was lost after James was killed at High Wood on 23rd July 1916.

The editors have annotated the diary very well and have authenticated it carefully. All in all a useful addition to the literature of trench life in 1915.

Just a couple of small things to look out for. It was not the life expectancy of an infantryman on the Western Front that was reckoned at three weeks. That distinction is usually reserved for new subalterns or RFC pilots. To suggest that the Bazentin Ridge was a physical obstacle to artillery engaged in shelling High Wood makes me wonder if the editors have ever been to the Somme or read much about artillery in 1916! A diary entry dated 1st June 1915 refers to 9th Division being in action 'last September' (ie 1914). This is not possible, so it is either Beatson's error needing a footnote, or a typo got past the copy editors!!

John Lee

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