

1: EARLY LIFE

Wilfred Risdon was born on January 28th, 1896, in a modest, but respectable, working class district of the city of Bath, Somerset, the last of 12 children [2 of whom died in infancy] to Edward George Fouracres Risdon, a bespoke boot and shoe maker, and Louisa who, as well as raising all these children was, at various times, a boot & shoe machinist. She was 4 or 5 years older than Edward and born in Exeter, where they married and it is very likely that they met; Edward, whose mother's maiden name was Fouracres [a prosperous Exeter metalworking family, specialising in cutlery] hence the third forename, was born in Devonport, but as a result of the itinerant nature of his father's trade, journeyman jeweller [and, very likely, an inability to settle anywhere too long], his parents moved around quite a lot, so it is altogether possible that Edward spent his formative years in and around Exeter.

There is an anecdotal story that Edward attended a Bluecoat School, but the details are confusing, and it has so far been impossible to corroborate this; suffice to say that Edward's father Edward [with no other known forenames] committed suicide at the age of 31 [the end of another fascinating, although ultimately tragic, lifestory], which must have been a devastating blow for the seven year old EGF, and no doubt influenced his later personality. Again anecdotally, it has been suggested that EGF was an adherent of the Plymouth Brethren, which group possibly provided solace for his distraught mother; he is known to have been strict, but not domineering, as a parent [not unusual in the Victorian era]; indeed, not incapable of wry or sardonic humour, but little is known of his specific religious leanings, outside the umbrella rubric of Christianity. That notwithstanding, Wilfred is known to have been something of a religious zealot in his youth, something which wouldn't have been unduly frowned upon at the beginning of the twentieth century, or regarded as evidence of a precocious need to impose his will upon predominantly older people; probably

readily humoured and accommodated.

Wilfred had two uncles, Ralph Alexander and Charles R., who also worked in the shoe industry; Ralph was born in Plymouth, maybe two years after EGF, and died in Bath; Charles was born in Bath so, even though the family might have moved back to Devon at some stage, the connection with Bath was well established before EGF moved there some time between 1886 and 1889, where his last four children were born. Given all this association with the boot & shoe industry, it would have been entirely consistent if this had been how Wilfred started his working career, but the census of 1911 shows Wilfred, at the age of 15 [presumably having finished school at the age of 13 or, if he was lucky, 14] working in bookbinding: the reason for this is a matter for pure speculation [aside from the tenuous leather connection].

The next, documented, event in his life was inevitably a momentous one, when he volunteered for the armed services in August 1914, on the outbreak of a horrendous war, which went under a variety of names down the years; for some inexplicable reason, later in life, Wilfred reckoned that he had been underage when he joined up, about which he had had to lie to be accepted, but in fact he was only a few months short of the lower age limit of 19 [if he is, indeed, correct in this later assertion], and not the “actually just short of my seventeenth birthday” that he claimed in an appeal hearing [1] which he must have known would be closely documented and scrutinised. The reason for this is most probably quite prosaic; it is unlikely that he would have attempted to be mendacious, had he even wanted to be, which doesn't seem to fit the general pattern: the more likely explanation is either that his numeracy skills were somewhat lacking [although stretching credibility somewhat], or that his age had not been a matter for regular discussion at home, and he had somehow become genuinely confused. This is consistent with a discrepancy of two years on his marriage licence, in 1935, when his age is shown as 37.

It is not yet known for certain where, and for which regiment Wilfred volunteered in August 1914, but it is a documented fact that he came