

ON THE BRINK

The Politics of Conflict 1914-1916 Project

EASTER RISING & BATTLE OF THE SOMME

ACTIVE SERVICE

ROBERT BILL

Robert Bill was raised in Ballyvoy, Doagh, Ballyclare, by parents Frank and Mary. In December 1909, aged 24, he married Mary McClure. Robert worked in The North of Ireland Paper Mill, Ballyclare. His wife was a housekeeper at Cogry Mill House, for the McMeekan family, who owned the local linen mill.

When war broke out, Bill enlisted in the 11th Battalion Royal Irish Rifles (South Antrim Volunteers) attached to 108th Brigade of the 36th (Ulster) Division. During the first week of October 1915, he travelled with his battalion to France, landing near Boulogne. On 13th June 1916, Bill wrote to his wife, Mary, hoping that the weather would take up so that the farmers will get on with their crops. He also noted a brooch he had sent to her and expressed satisfaction in having been to church on Sunday. Some days later, on 25th June, he was killed at the Somme, aged 32.

The day after Bill's death, Rev J G Paton, Presbyterian Chaplain to Bill's battalion, wrote to Mary extending his sympathy and that of Bill's comrades. Rev Paton wrote:

'he was killed instantaneously yesterday morning & passed away without any pain. Your Husband was buried yesterday on a hillside among beautiful trees overlooking a river which flows peacefully along in spite of the noise & terror.'



On 14th August 1916, Captain E F Smyth wrote to Mary apologising for the delay in writing owing to all the A Coy Officers being wounded, however he did offer some detail on the circumstances surrounding Bill's death:

'He was killed outright on June 25th by a German shell, while we were waiting in our trenches during the bombardment which lasted for 7 days before our attack on 1st July and was buried in Thiepval Wood that afternoon by the Parson attached to us.'

Shortly after his death, his wife gave birth to his only child; a little girl.

Rifleman Robert Bill is one of 92 names commemorated on Ballyclare War Memorial. He is also remembered on Thiepval Memorial and Kilbride Parish Church Roll of Honour.

Studio photograph of newlyweds Robert Bill and his wife Mary
Courtesy of Leith Burgess