A STRAY SHAFT OF ANCIENT SUNLIGHT

Ronald Walker

READERS OF THE *CHRONICLE* WILL RECALL that at the end of chapter four of *The Innocent Moon* Phillip, whilst on a visit to France, decides that he must make a pilgrimage to the landscapes of the Western Front:

> *He could not rest there, he must go, walk again upon the battlefields, see once more those places which one day must be recreated as a monument to his friends in the war.*

'From Paris,'Williamson writes, 'he took a slow train to Arras, to seek upon the battlefields the friends of his youth.' The story of that pilgrimage is told in *The Innocent Moon* with disappointing brevity in chapter five, a mere fifteen pages of the 350 in the novel. It is at the end of that chapter that Phillip hears what Williamson calls 'the voice of the wan star' saying to him:

> *The Fifth Army? What you seek is lost forever in ancient sunlight, which rises again as Truth.*

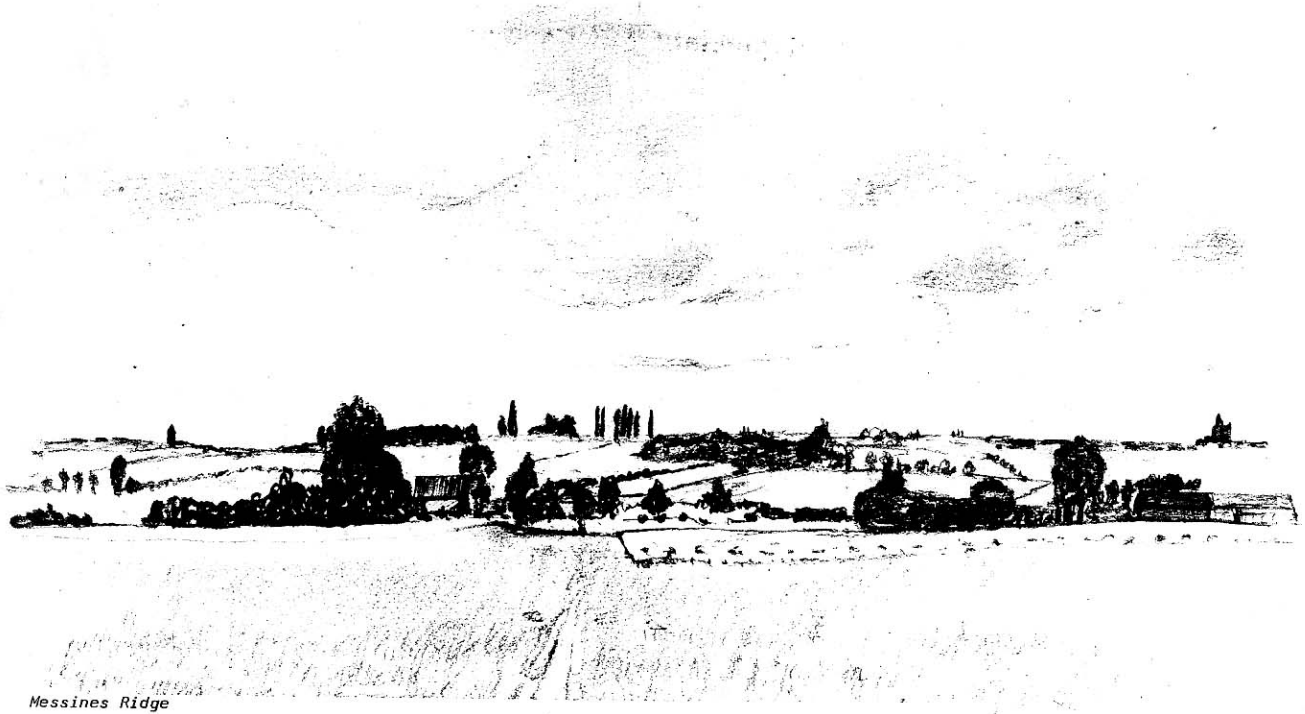
A much fuller record of that visit is found in *The Wet Flanders Plain*, published in book form in 1929, which I refer to as a 'stray shaft' since it is certainly among the lesser known of Williamson's works. It is interesting that at the end of it he employs exactly the same words as he was later to use in *The Innocent Moon* and elsewhere, about things 'lost in ancient sunlight' that 'rise again as Truth'. Indeed the various sections of *The Wet Flanders Plain* are the first-hand impressions which thirty-three years later were to be enshrined in the novel, sometimes almost verbatim.

Stephen Clarke supplies some valuable bibliographical information about *The Wet Flanders Plain*. A mere 320 copies were first published, by the Beaumont Press, but Faber put out 2999 copies of a revised edition. He adds, 'No subsequent edition ever appeared (or was called for).' The contents were originally printed as *And This Was Ypres* in four episodes in *The Daily Express* in July 1927, and the page-proofs of the manuscript bore the title: *Ten Years After; a Battlefield Tour in France and Belgium by an Old Soldier in the War to end Wars 1914-1918*, dedicated to Bill Busby; whilst the published version was dedicated to C.W.R. Nevinson.

Stephen Clarke also speaks of an irascible letter sent by Robert Graves to the *New York Times Book Review*, in which he wrote:

> *The only connection I have ever had with Mr Williamson is that he wrote a silly, neurotic book about visiting the war areas and that I said in a signed review that it was silly and neurotic.*

The book was in fact a resounding failure, but it has remained for me



Messines Ridge

The Messines-Wytschaete Ridge from the West (Messines at Right)

Dominating the landscape, frowning over all, was Messines, looking like a mass of cracked, dark-brown crab-shells against the sky-line. The dark-brown serrated mass was almost sinister in distinctness with the light of early morning behind it. (*How Dear Is Life*, p.277)

one of the most effective and readable of Henry Williamson's autobiographical writings. I do not find it silly or neurotic. It has, admittedly, the full flow of sentiment and anger that we find, say, in *The Patriot's Progress* or indeed in many parts of the *Chronicle*; but would Henry Williamson without what W.R. Rodgers calls his 'pities and indignations' be recognisable to us? What Graves found silly and neurotic I find immensely sad and moving, a gripping journal of one remembering the agonies of Flanders, *un soldat anglais retourne.* And it is doubly interesting to find, on p.136 of the Faber edition, the author telling a family at Miraumont that he was already

> *meditating a novel, or novels, of the war, the story of an insignificant and obscure family which had helped, in its small way, to prepare and make the Great War.*

'I would, of course,' he adds, 'have to draw on some of my own experiences, as Henri Barbusse had in *Le Feu.*' So that, even prior to 1927, Henry was thinking of his great Phillip Maddison series.

What follows is an attempt to introduce to those who have not come across *The Wet Flanders Plain* its general content and tone.

Williamson went with an ex-officer of the Tanks 'with a lead-splashed neck...and four-toed feet (frostbite)' via Calais to the scenes of those ancient battles which had now become a tourist attraction, appealing naturally to Americans in Europe. Some parts of the front had been restored to newness and normality; other parts had been preserved as historic memorials of the line, where an admission fee was charged. They went through St Omer to Hazebrouck, its *Grand' Place* now peaceful with flying swifts when 'in those days...there were big guns, painted in blotches of yellow, brown and green, like old and new cabbage leaves.' In bed at his hotel he reflected: 'No chance of being awakened, to put on sodden, muddy boots and clothes, to march up the line again, into the agony and desolation of a counter-attack.'

Then to Poperinghe, to visit the Toc H chapel in the hop-loft, 'where many thousands of men had received the Blessed Sacrament before going up to the Passchendaele battles'. The new hotel there reminded him that there was now a certain similar establishment in Ypres with the legend in gilt letters: 'Most modern and up-to-date hotel in the Salient'.

From Ypres a *char-a-banc* could be hired to go to Schrapnell Corner, Tyne Cot Cemetery (absolutely largest in the district, about 12000 graves'), or the 'Highly Recommended and most interesting point of view Trip No. 7 including St Julien, Poelcapelle and the famous Houthulst Forest, Death Trench kept up in the state it was during the war and can be visited for the small entrance-fee of one franc'. Henry Williamson did in fact take a Sunday *char-a-banc* trip round the salient. One of the places they called at was Pilkem Ridge, another the Steenbeke and then Langemarck. A memorial was being unveiled there. There were pompous patriotic speeches, and a maudlin prayer uttered by the chaplain.

> *We stood silent and bareheaded before the Memorial, on ground but lately a horror of manifold agonies suffered by men of several nationalities, men who had not wanted to do the things that they had done, but had wanted their homes and their families; men who had suffered agonies which were now of Glory, Sacrifice, Heroism, Patriotism - all the abstract ideas which Europe still suffered her children to be taught.*

An American in Ypres was examining a rusty howitzer when Williamson pointed out to him a better specimen fifty yards away. He replied: 'This one will do. Now I've only got to see Hill 60, the holes at Messines, the Bloodchapel at Bruges, and the Death Trench, then I'm through.'

Williamson spent many silent hours alone on the battlements of Ypres, thinking and grieving over the miseries of 'the undone years'. 'How sweet a thing it is to be alive and free in the sunlight among the fair grasses of summer, watching the swallows' wings gleaming blue above the water.' With this idyllic thought he would turn away and look down over the salient, recalling the years when 'Time seemed to have gone out of the making of the world, and Fatigue, Boredom, Fear and Filth took its place in the human show.' Seeing the green fields and the clusters of houses and villages, he reflected:

> *For years these few square miles were shapeless as the ingredients of a Christmas pudding while being stirred. Not even worms were left after the bombardments - all blasted to shreds, with the bricks of ruins, stumps of trees, and metalling of roads... Mankind suffered over a million casualties within the dish, double-rimmed with inner and outer ridges, of the salient... Now, if you would recall 1917 to your memory, you must stay away from this fine agricultural district.*

Near St Julien he saw the Canadian Memorial, which to him was not a a memorial for Canadians alone but for all soldiers in the war.

> *It faces towards Ypres, not towards a vanquished enemy as do many of the war memorials to be seen in France today, such as the Gallic cock crowing triumphantly on a broken cannon at Roclincourt, or the caribou roaring eastwards from Beaumont Hamel, or the defiant artisan-soldier standing firm and fierce at Lens.*
>
> *Do the dead feel cock-crowing triumph over the dead? The crowing is for the industrial magnates, the Lens or Ruhr mine-owners, not for the poor unknowing working-men who fell in the Great Horror and became part of it.*
>
> *No: the colossal head and shoulders of the soldier with reversed arms emerging from the tall stone column has the gravity and strength of grief coming from full knowledge of old wrongs done to men by men. It mourns; but it mourns for all mankind.*

Other places he returned to were Ploegsteert, Armentières, and Arras ('a cesspit where the scoriae of the post-war period have slid from the eruption of war'). He toiled up the long gradual slope of Vimy

Ridge, captured in 1917. Here he watched a bull and a cow grazing quietly together, nose by nose, at the edge of the sunken road. 'I cannot explain it, but the sight of those gentle beasts filled me with a tranquil happiness all that afternoon and evening.'

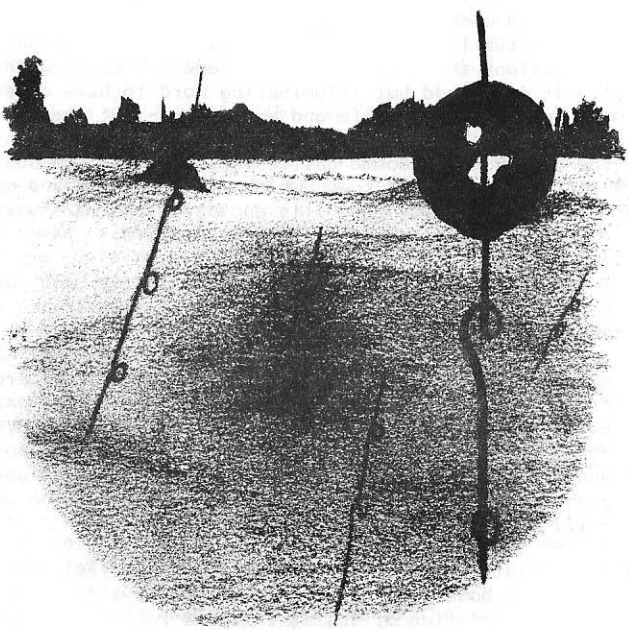
On the Arras-Bethune road there had been ferocious fighting between the French and the Germans. It was called the 'labyrinthe', and now it had become the German Concentration Graveyard, made by order of the French government, with acres of black crosses, nearly 100 000 of them, having name, number and regiment stencilled on in white. By contrast, the British and French cemeteries were beflowered, the French crosses painted with the *tricouleur*. It was Williamson's opinion that if the French could have given the Germans a parcel of ground where their dead lie ('It might have cost as much as one submarine'), it would have been a gesture - one with a precedent from 2000 years ago - 'and the heart of the people would have been moved'. An appeal to Germany to work with France to restore the shattered land 'might well have given another direction to the history of Europe.'

A visit to Bullecourt reminded him of April and May 1917. There had been fifteen assaults in three weeks on a line that was never reached. Eventually the whole area became for him so saturated with grim recollections that, he says, 'I became irritated with the whole country'. It is an odd but illuminating word to have chosen. He longed to be home again with his wife and small son - but there were still other places to visit. He went south to Albert and the valley of the Ancre, the scene of the Somme battles of 1916. 'My comrades died in the cellars and rubble of this town, which was destroyed and made fetid by the German guns away over the hills enclosing the marshy valley.' And here the writing becomes intensely introspective:

> *I was entirely a foreigner among the living, and half a foreigner to myself - a man who had lost part of himself and was only now beginning to find it again...*
>
> *I could not sleep. Was there a demoniacal influence in the marsh, materialising out of the harsh, ceaseless croaking of the frogs among the stumps of the dead poplars? The perpetual and restless spirits of old cruelty and hate and despair wandering among the reedy shell-holes, among the crumbling wheels of sunken guns, and the brown wire in the long grass? The young green had grown again, hiding the old bitternesses, but the desolation was still there.*

'The desolation was still there.' It is, I feel, the peculiar strength of this book that it so fiercely conveys the desolation wrought by the war; a desolation of spirit that has robbed succeeding generations of so much hope, of a sense of direction; has robbed them of the comforts of religion, culture and altruism. Deeply unhappy, Williamson returned home. He was aware that he had 'put into the scene what he had felt'. Silly and neurotic? Henry answers that charge in the penultimate sentence: 'For we put into things what we feel, and if we feel nothing, then there is nothing.'

The Wet Flanders Plain is a book of intense and overwhelming 'feeling'. Of all those on my shelves it is the one, I think, with the saddest title. *Forlorn Sunset* and *For Whom The Bell Tolls* seem catch-penny beside it. And the sadness pervades every line of this strange little monograph - a shaft of misty sunlight that gently illuminates the soul of a sensitive, angry, and heroic man.



Newfoundland Park, Beaumont Hamel