

Editorial

STANDING AT THE BACK of Tyne Cot military cemetery at Passchendaele you look across the rows of regimented gravestones and beyond the cemetery wall to the flat fields of Flanders, and thence, in imagination, to the English Channel. The Flanders plain is pleasing and restful to the eye, ordered and regular. So is the cemetery; but here there is also the bright colour from the roses and flowering shrubs and green bushes that contrast with the gravestones and complement them. The living plants stand in their trimmed beds whose edges are ruler-straight and enclose soil raked as with a tooth-comb. Their colour and softness add tenderness and mystery. And here there always seems to lurk the spirit of sixty-five years ago, the same spirit to be found in a cemetery as big as Passchendaele's with nearly 12 000 graves as in smaller garden cemeteries that contain graves to be counted in dozens.

From the lawns of Tyne Cot, standing by the Great Cross and looking over the gentle slope that leads down to the encircling wall, I could see the friendly spires of Ypres. From those hazy towers I had driven, through the Menin Gate and out along the road to Menin (or Menen, as it is in Flemish). I drove quite slowly and stopped by a cafe standing at a cross-roads. At this crossing there is also a railway-line marked by the warning crossed boards that is the style on the Continent. Just a quick look here. I'd read about the place, seen photographs of it: the emptiness, shattered trees and obliteration of Hell Fire Corner. Traffic roared past. It was a noisy place sixty-odd years ago when the Germans had the range of it, firing from their happy places on the ridge surrounding the Ypres salient, blowing to pieces the men who marched there, or who showed their faces. In the Cloth Hall museum in Ypres I had seen the remains of a notice painted on a piece of metal rusty and holed; I managed to decipher the neat fading-white letters: DO NOT STAND ABOUT HERE. IF YOU ARE NOT SHOT SOMEONE ELSE WILL BE.

I stood about there, and watched the traffic speeding past on that straight road running from Ypres to Menin.

I drove on, and somewhere along the road I turned left, and drove into Passchendaele from the east. I remember a village of ordinary red-brick houses lining a straight road. It was an undistinguished looking place. Ahead of me, at the far end of the tarmacked road with its wide stone-setted run-off, was the church, its square tower surmounted by a grey tiled sharply pointed pyramid. A line of newly planted trees stood on the grassy bank alongside the road. Telephone wires stood out against the blue sky. It was an ordinary scene. But here, as in many other similar villages, there had been fighting and bloodshed and drowning in mud; and now Passchendaele - so artfully named - has risen again and all is as it was.

I suppose. In my innocence I wonder yet again that young men, mere boys, responded to the irresistible Call to climb the ladder I stood beside in Sanctuary Wood, came out of the trenches and scaled that ladder and thousands like it to stand and crouch and fall on the ground above.

Men are still scaling those ladders; there is a long way to go, it seems. Perhaps Henry Williamson scaled more than most in his lifetime; and if we judge him to have made some blind ascents, we do so in our efforts to *understand* him, both as man and writer.

W.H.



The Golden Virgin

Another ordinary scene: The Basilica of The Golden Virgin, Albert, France