

Book Reviews

ACTION REPLAY by Jeffrey Hamm. Howard Baker Ltd., £8.95

There are a number of references to Henry Williamson in this autobiography; its author met him on many occasions, but states: "I would not venture to say that I knew him well. Who did? He was a complex character, a man of many parts and facets". Jeffrey Hamm first met Williamson when he was contributing to *The European*, the magazine so brilliantly edited by Diana Mosley in the 1950s. The magazine's literary contributors included, besides Henry Williamson, Richard Aldington, Anna Cavan, Roy Campbell, Desmond Stewart and Alan Neame, all of whom approved the cultural aspects of the Mosleys' 'European' policies, but were not actually members of the 'movement'. At this time Jeffrey Hamm became, without, as he explains, even a day's training in journalism, printing, or publishing, the business manager of the Irish and English Euphorian publishing companies, which published *The European*, and interesting books such as Hans-Ulrich Udel's *Stuka Pilot* with an introduction by Group-Captain Douglas Bader, and a new edition of Goethe's *Faust*, with an introduction by Oswald Mosley.

In 1948, when Mosley started his post-war Union Movement, Mr Hamm was invited to join the office staff, and in due time he became private secretary to Sir Oswald. These facts guarantee for his book a lively interest; but this is by no means its only interest. Jeffrey Hamm was born in Ebbw Vale, in 1915, under the future shadow, as it were, of Aneurin Bevan. His account of his early days there, and later in Gwent, where he went to school in Monmouth, gives the reader a very clear picture of the social conditions then prevailing in those parts. His account of his early attempts to earn a living are very diverting; as a young man he seems to have resembled in cheek and resourcefulness Denry Machin, the hero of Arnold Bennett's novel *The Card*. His experiences as a teacher in a series of private schools are quite as ludicrously funny as those recounted by Evelyn Waugh in *Decline and Fall*. Just before the war chance or accident took him to the Falkland Islands as a travelling teacher in Government employ. His account of life as he found it in those desolate territories is of particular interest today. When war broke out in 1939, he was interned - in South Africa! When released in 1941 he joined the Army.

Not all his readers will support Mr Hamm's policies; but all must appreciate his urbanity, which extends to friend and foe alike. I find this a likeable narrative of an unusual life. He gives the Henry Williamson Society an honourable mention, and I hope its members will add his book to their Williamsoniana.

BROCARD SEWELL

THE WAR WALK: A Journey along the Western Front by Nigel H. Jones. Robert Hale. 272 pp, 50 half-tones, 6 maps. £9.95. (Publication October 1983.)

In recent times we have become used to specialist books by modern writers on The Great War. By specialist I mean those such as Martin

Middlebrook, who write a new history of a single battle, or even the first day of a battle - such as the Somme - and who bone up on their subject by revisiting the old battlefields. How far this helps the writer, and ultimately the reader, bearing in mind that only the tiniest fraction of readers would have been there originally as truly understanding participants, is open to question. Personally, I have always doubted that my imagination has come remotely near what it was like on the Western Front despite feeling that I have lived alongside the finest writers of this period at times. This was brought home to me recently reading a history of the Yom Kippur War. Some of the places on Egyptian soil that were fought over are still familiar to me, not just generally, but specifically, and I could visualise them exactly. Having been in uniform, and experienced, if in a minor way, the expenditure of bullets and shells in anger in those very areas, I felt moderately close to understanding what it was really like. But even then this was not true because I had not been involved in any way with the action of the 1973 war. It is also true that those who are there often see little enough beyond the events that occur directly to them in their own small part of a battle. This is often clearly demonstrated in the 'reminiscences' set down in war books - not this means that only 'Official Histories' that set out to paint the broadest canvasses in the greatest detail should be read. Of necessity they lack the humanity and other virtues that mark the individual narrative.

I was therefore intrigued by Nigel Jones's book which offered not only an overall 'history' of the Great War but an appraisal of the major battles on the Western Front as seen through his own eyes and those of survivors he interviewed. This is not a new device; but additionally (and for the first time?) he actually walked the greater part of the Front and visited all the places that witnessed major actions. An ambitious project: it stemmed from childhood and youth when the "Great War" series of T.V. films made fifty years after the war caught his attention deeply, and from a visit to some of the old battlefields with his father who had served throughout the conflict.

I found the historical synopses, political and military, generally adequate and accurate even if much that was complex and highly involved in both spheres has had of necessity to be compressed and simplified. I do, however, take serious issue over Mr Jones's assessment of the Battle of Third Ypres, or Passchendaele. Certainly in its horror it put even Verdun to shame and cast Haig in the role of bloody butcher in the minds of soldiers and civilians alike; but it is grossly inaccurate to state that the main effect of the French mutinies in the spring and summer of 1917, which effectively precluded any further major action on the part of the French army for the remainder of the year, was just the chance Haig had been waiting for to loose off a bloodbath in Flanders. In truth there really was no choice. Petain, the new French commander, had made clear to Haig that any serious German attack in the south would have almost certainly ended in total disaster for the Allies. To bleed the German reserves in Flanders was the only option left. In addition, the ever worsening situation in Russia could not be ignored and indeed it was the release of the vast number of troops for the Western Front when Russia did collapse that almost lost the war for the Allies. Readers unaware of these factors can only come to one conclusion when they have

read that on October 7, as the rains once more turned the battlefield into a morass, Haig decided to fight on: that he was indeed a butcher. Mr Jones's comment, "His (Haig's) reason for not calling the hopeless campaign to a close must remain a mystery...", can only endorse such a view.

On the use of veterans' memories and correspondence to 'illustrate' or endorse trench life and particular events, I am dubious as to how often this really works. Clearly, editing and re-arranging must often be necessary, but frequently 'extracts' are all too short and sometimes irrelevant. Surely we do not need the testimony of three or four men to tell us that food in the front line was often poor and usually consisted of biscuits and bully or Maconochie's stew? Some extracts are valuable, such as those of a signaller, Sgt. Major Ibbetson, on the Somme, 'Mac' Francis on tanks at Cambrai, and Field on the chaos after Ludendorff's March 21 offensive.

In Nigel Jones's own *Journey*, which for the most part follows the historical account, I was also a little disappointed; but in fairness it must be remembered that in many sectors of the Front Line little trace remains even of heavy fighting, and many sectors remained 'quiet'. The impression given by the major centres such as Ypres and Verdun, still heavily geared to the War theme, are telling. Beyond the immaculate peaceful cemeteries still lurk the crumbling forts and pillboxes, the vast mine craters and the rotting detritus of war.

Apart from Nigel Jones's own experiences there is little radically new in this book which may not be found in many others; but I am sure that as a background book for those contemplating their own visit to the Western Front it will be most useful. With this in mind, it is a pity that a few more specific details on where to go, how to get there, with perhaps an itinerary or two to aid the visitor with not much time to spare, could not have been included.

JOHN HOMAN

IN THE DORIAN MODE: A Life of John Gray, 1966-1934 by Brocard Sewell.
Tabb House, Padstow. 240pp, photos. £18

I am sure that many readers of this new, and first full-length biography of John Gray will echo Fr Sewell's regret over the two almost blank periods - from a documentary point of view - in that life. The first covers his early years, and the second the brief but intense friendship with Oscar Wilde (this surely being the more regrettable). It seems there was probably a good deal of documentary evidence in the form of letters and so on, but Gray, who ended the friendship well before Wilde's trial and imprisonment in 1895, pondered upon his own past and future ever more deeply after this event until, over two years later, he finally decided to alter his life irrevocably, and destroyed all evidence of that friendship. He did, however, maintain a vague link

through his friendship with Andre Raffalovich, an earlier friend of Wilde's, a friendship which always retained a high degree of formality but lasted for more than forty years and was only dissolved by death.

These deficiencies apart, I still have some niggling questions such as where (if not from the wealthy Raffalovich) did Gray obtain the finances needed to follow his excessive and expensive lifestyle in the London - and elsewhere - of the 1890s, when his personal income amounted to only £10 per annum.

Between 1892 and 1897, Gray enjoyed no little success in the literary world of *fin-de-siècle* London. He was never interested in the commercial possibilities of writing, maintaining at both ends of his writing life the cult of aestheticism, although Fr Sewell does suggest that a fear of the complexities and responsibilities associated with a more commercial approach may also have been a deciding factor. These works, with the now famous 'Blue Calendars' (named after their blue covers and containing an original poem for every month) constitute the major output of work before everything changed for Gray in 1898.

An earlier convert to the Catholic Church (from a nominally Methodist background), he decided in 1898 to study for the priesthood and dedicate his remaining years to God. In 1905 a decision was taken to build a new church in the suburb of Morningside and it was here, at St Peter's (as the church was dedicated in 1907) that Fr John Gray commenced a rectorship which only ended with his death. While it is scarcely surprising that his whole demeanour and way of life changed radically when he became a priest, it does seem he seldom let the mask slip again. The words 'reserved', 'aloof', 'enigmatic', 'inscrutable', were applied by many who knew him in his later years, and although many could testify to his sympathy for and way with children there is no doubt that he could be, and often was, remote. It also seems rather strange that while as a curate he buckled down and worked immensely hard for the poor and sick of his first parish and was fully aware of and shocked by the social and economic inequalities of Edwardian (and later) England, his zeal seemed to end when he took over his new parish, although there is something to indicate he may have still helped individuals anonymously. Again, although his friendship with Raffalovich was so long - they met almost daily for years - he always behaved with the utmost correctness. It does seem that when he finally decided to give up his old life for one of discipline and devotion he also took upon himself a self-imposed ascetic discipline which he believed to be necessary to expiate the looseness of his early years.

This is an admirable book, the religious aspects of which have been written with the general reader in mind. There are sufficient well chosen photographs of the leading characters which are clear but could have been much more striking if printed on art paper instead of matt, but there is a nice binding in mock vellum included in the rather stiff price.

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