HENRY WILLIAMSON AND THE GENERATION OF 1914

Nigel Jones

This paper was read by Nigel Jones, author of The War Walk, *at the Annual General Meeting of the Henry Williamson Society, Georgeham, Devon, on 15 October 1983.*

I MUST CRAVE THE INDULGENCE OF YOU ALL on two counts. First, as will soon become apparent, I am not a professional lecturer. Second, I did not have, as so many of you did, the pleasure and privilege of knowing Henry Williamson personally. I stand before you tonight as one who came to Williamson purely through his writings, and anything that I say must be heard in that light.

I am not a great lover of general theories, but it seems to me that any study of Henry Williamson's life and writings must bring the reader to certain conclusions that can be shared by whatever routes we take to reach the man. Lovers of his country and nature books and admirers of *The Flax of Dream* and *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight* alike cannot fail to see the themes that run like a silver thread through every word he wrote. Very briefly, I would define these as the need for reconciliation and redemption, and the place of the individual as a unit in a natural and even hierarchical order. Williamson, for all his waywardness, was never an anarchist. For all his hatred and suspicion of the increasing mechanisation of man he had that acceptance of order and an organic and organised society which a close study of the ruthless and relentless natural world always brings.

The question I would like to talk about tonight was how far his attitudes were shaped by the crucial experience of his life: his four years as a fighting man on the Western Front in the war that was called Great. Secondly, I want to touch on the effect of that searing time on other articulate artists in all countries who shared the life and death in the trenches, and discover how far such attitudes were common to them. In short, were there attitudes and beliefs which, knitted together from differing strands, form a web which we can call in shorthand a 'generational consciousness'. Was there, in fact, a generation of 1914? I believe there was, for reasons I shall shortly explain.

At the beginning of *A Test to Destruction* Williamson describes the Western Front as "a great livid wound stretching from the North Sea to the Alps - a wound which never ceased to weep". In an obituary tribute to Henry the poet Ronald Duncan uses the same image: his life from the Somme onwards, says Duncan, was "one long wound". Another poet who shared Henry's front-line experiences and who was equally affected throughout a long life was Siegfried Sassoon; he uses the same language

in his poem written to commemorate the opening of the great Menin Gate memorial in Ypres: we find the line "Here was the world's worst wound". Both men, we are told by eye-witnesses, returned in spirit to the front-line of half a century before, on their deathbeds, and could speak of little else but the suffering on the Somme.

Both men led full and active lives after the First World War, but they could never get the experience out of their system. What was the unique nature of the trenches that burned itself so indelibly into their minds? To find some part of the answer I think we have to return to the world as it was before that war. Many people think that the outbreak of hostilities in the summer of 1914 broke upon Europe with the force and suddenness of a thunderstorm interrupting a genteel garden party. But there were signs aplenty of the coming storm for those with eyes to see. In the opening years of the century there was a whole series of international incidents and confrontations, any of which could have tipped the world over the brink into war. Agadir, the Panther crisis, the Balkan wars, even the Boer war, saw the European powers squaring up to each other in increasingly hostile and belligerent poses. And all the time the race to manufacture arms, to use rapidly developing industrial technology to pile up weapons, to build bigger and better guns and battleships, went on. So the surface calm of Edwardian society was merely a thin muslin film draped over a seething snake pit of threat and menace. And who can doubt that somewhere deep in the collective unconscious of the nations there was a secret - and sometimes not so secret - *longing* for war?

We find it in the rhapsodic outpourings with which poets greeted the outbreak of the conflict. "Happy are they who die," wrote the Frenchman Charles Peguy days before he was killed leading his unit into the battle of the Marne. "I ADORE war," exulted the poet Julian Grenfell just before he too fell. And the most famous yea-sayer of all, Rupert Brooke, cried:

> *Now, God be thanked Who has matched us with his Hour,*
> *And caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping,*
> *With hand made sure, clear eye, and sharpened power,*
> *To turn, as swimmers into cleanness leaping.*[1]

Brooke leaves us in no doubt that he was delighted to leave a world "grown old and cold and weary".[2] In his excess of enthusiasm he even annexes paradise for his patriotic purposes: if he should die, he tells us, he wants to rest "under an English heaven".[3] What then are we to gather from the words of the spokesmen for the generation who flocked in their hundreds of thousands across the continent to the recruiting stations?

First, they were quite ready - even eager - to lay their lives on the altar of King and Country, or Kaiser and Fatherland. Second, they seemed to regard war as a great game - one might almost say a continuation of cricket by other means. Third, and perhaps most important, they see war as an ablution. Every so often the greasy corruption of peace must go through a moral sheep-dip of blood; a hygienic or surgical cleansing, a vast, purifying cauterisation by fire that will purge them

of poison and harvest the sorn of youth for a new seeding.

How, in a few short years, was this naivety changed into the literature of suffering and disillusion as exemplified by Sassoon, Owen, Barbusse and Remarque, and Williamson himself? How are Brooke's wide-eyed blatherings transformed into the bitter spleen of a Richard Aldington? The answer must lie in the experience of war's reality and suffering by the men of the front. The men of 1914 took with them into war a courtly view of conflict that was as dated as a medieval Book of Hours. A glance at the key words will suffice to show what I mean. The words of 1914 are 'honour', 'sacrifice', 'sunny breeze' and 'safety'. Death is a clean, painless thing: "Night shall fold him in soft wings", as Grenfell wrote. Another doomed young poet, Charles Sorley, sums it up:

> *All the hills and vales along*
> *Earth is bursting into song,*
> *And the singers are the chaps*
> *Who are going to die perhaps.*[4]

We are an eternity away from the world of Owen and Sassoon whose recurring motifs are 'mud', 'blood', the white faces of frightened and dying boys, the merciless 'thumping' of the guns that never ends. The guns, like the men, 'moan' and 'shriek'. Instead of a clean death, life ends in gargling froth from gassed lungs, or, what seems even worse, a sad and sterile existence in institutions for healthy men maimed, blinded and mutilated by war. The terror pursues the men far away from the front - they are the prey of wild wolves of nightmares, bad dreams, and the dead comrades who come and paw at the sheets of their hospital beds. It is surely no coincidence that the war's greatest poets, Owen and Sassoon, met in a hospital for neurasthenic and shell-shocked officers. Theirs is the poetry of the abattoir and the torture chamber, for that is what the war had become.

The enemy now is not so much the Germans, increasingly seen as fellow sufferers just a few yards away, but the generals in their comfortable chateaux who order attacks against impossible odds after a glance at a map that cannot show the true condition of the trenches. Even more hated are the folks back home, force-fed on the pap from the patriotic press, who can have no conception of the sufferings of their sons and husbands.

The relationship between Phillip Maddison and his father Richard in the *Chronicle* novels mirrors and typifies in an extreme form that between the fighting front and the Home Front. Richard is angry, frustrated at being too old to take an active part in the war, and maintaining the unyielding parlour patriotism of those far away from the cold, the wet, the aching limbs, the chill dawns and the ever-hungry guns. In contrast, Williamson himself serves us the truth on a platter, neat, without wind or water: "Blood ran down from a hole in his right temple. The back of his head was open like an egg, hairy with thick blood and broken-sploshed grey brains. He snored and gurgled and twitched. Blood trickled from his ears and mouth; he kicked, blew blood bubbles from his nostrils."[5] This, surely, was the real world of war.

So the men in the trenches were on their own: cut off from their commanders, isolated from their loved ones, flung down in an unnatural womanless world of terrifying violence and sudden death; they must create their own culture for survival. To fight, even to endure, "Patriotism," as Nurse Cavell said in another context, "is not enough".

The first writer to mark the changing mood was a Frenchman, Henri Barbusse. Already a mature man of 41 when war broke out, Barbusse volunteered for the front at once. He served for months in the trenches of Artois and Picardy and was twice mentioned in dispatches for gallantry. Wounded and hospitalised, he was declared unfit for active service, but wangled his way back to his unit as a stretcher bearer. His fictionalised war diaries *Under Fire* won the Goncourt Prize in 1917, and was read in translation by Sassoon, Owen and Williamson. It was the first book to record the experience of the trenches as the serving soldier knew it to be. There were no broken heroics here, no fake emotions, and no puffed-up patriotic exaltation. Barbusse tells it like it is. Although written from a pacifist standpoint, Barbusse does not hold the war at a distasteful distance as the parlour pacifists like Bertrand Russell were wont to do. For him it is a living experience that must be gone through despite its horror and squalor. Henry Williamson found in his pages the truth of his favourite dictum from Hardy, that "if way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at the Worst". Barbusse even has the temerity to conclude the book with the reflection: "If the present war has advanced progress by one step, its miseries and slaughter will count for little". Barbusse was untypical of the trench generation in that his experience propelled him violently to the left of the political spectrum. He became a committed Communist, and eventually died in Moscow.

Perhaps his most devoted disciple among the war generation was Siegfried Sassoon, and it may have been Barbusse's example that played the most potent part in inspiring the poet's famous protest against the war. But after his refusal to participate in the further prosecution of what had become to him an unjustified aggressive war had been successfully hushed up, and Sassoon himself hustled off to the hospital for shell-shocked officers, he found himself unable to keep away from the front, and with a courage that equalled his original protest Sassoon took his place once again with his comrades at the front. It was no longer loyalty to their country or cause that moved the majority of men in the trenches, but loyalty to their friends at the front. In a word, Comradeship.

For Henry Williamson this realisation of the ties that bound him, not only to the men on his own side, but also to the supposed enemy, came with the blinding flash of revelation quite early in the war. It was his experience of the fraternisation that took place on Christmas Eve 1914 between the opposing armies. This became the central theme, one might almost say the guiding myth, of his whole life, and it influenced his future conduct down to the day of his death.

What, then, were the elements that bound together the front line men on both sides? There was a strange combination of negative and positive values: hatred for the profiteers and patriots safe behind the lines at home; a generalised contempt for civilians; a refusal to look beyond

tomorrow - for the future, in the trenches, was infinitely remote when men were literally face to face with danger, discomfort and death. Social distinctions and the polite differences of class meant little to them. A dislike of military red tape translated later into impatience with bureaucracy. An acceptance of orders became a liking for order. The necessity for quick, unthinking decisions became a dislike of discussion and democracy. Even a man who thought himself on the political left, like Siegfried Sassoon, wrote a poem exulting in a fantasy of bayonetting 'Yellow pressmen' and ordering his 'Trusty bombers' to "turn "those Junkers out of Parliament". Here we have all the essential elements that later became the ideology of Fascism, and we have to ask why variations of that ideology found a ready response among many members of the generation of 1914.

When the guns stopped firing in 1918, the war's survivors found themselves in a state of shock. Trained and used to purely military skills they often were ill adapted to civilian life. They returned from the front to a homeland very different from the one they had left behind. Richard Aldington describes the spectacle of front line officers, nerve-racked and unemployable, taking their places with the down and out dossers on London's embankment. Such was the gratitude of the country, such was Lloyd George's "Land fit for Heroes".

The men of the trenches were thus a 'Lost Generation' in every sense. Not only were some of the best and brightest of them dead, but the remainder felt out of place, rejected, strangers in a land which seemed to have no need of their services. The immediate post-war culture of the Twenties in Britain seemed only anxious to forget the grey days of war. The night-clubbing young people, the flappers, the emancipated cigarette-smoking free-loving women, seemed bent only on having a good time. Life was one long frenetic party, and literature was dominated by the cynical books of those too young to have fought like Huxley, Eliot and Waugh. Henry Montherlant, returning to the sacred French battlefields of Verdun, found the skulls of his former comrades had been desecrated by tourists who had carved their initials on them. The British Army returned to the dole queue, and Parliament was full of hard-faced businessmen who had done well out of the war. German officers found themselves totally alone - like Erich Maria Remarque - or reviled and mocked by the Mob, their hard-won decorations ripped from their chests and shoulders. It is hardly surprising that these conditions bred a murderous resistance and resentment in the hardened front line men.

This feeling at first made itself known in politics. In Italy, the ex-soldiers formed the backbone of Mussolini's *Fascisti* who seized power by intimidation and violence in 1922. In Germany the soldiers formed the *Freikorps*, desperate bands of mercenaries who saw their mission in life as the murder of leftists and democrats who, they felt, had betrayed their sacrifice. The main spokesman for this generation was Ernst Junger, who had served throughout the war, and had been much wounded and decorated. He had not shared the customary disillusion but had revelled in the violence of war, seeing in it an intensity of passion impossible in peacetime. Those who had come through the fire were now purged and pure, hardened and tempered like steel, an elite born to conquer and rule. His

attitude can be summed up in the words of Lear: "I shall do such things, what they are I know not yet... but they shall be the terror of the world". They would indeed.

Henry Williamson fled from this world to the truth and tranquility of the traditional countryside. Where man had failed him, perhaps nature would heal and reconcile. Unable to settle down in civvy street - in his case Fleet Street - he would become a wanderer between the worlds of the past and the future.

But the wounds of the war were still raw, and they would eventually erupt. Williamson led the way in 1930 with his book *The Patriot's Progress*. Here, as so often, Henry was a pathfinder. In a few score pages he charts the progress from patriotism, through disillusion to ultimate despair, of a symbolic simple soldier, John Bullock. In a prose as rapid as gunfire he dispenses with all artifice and shows the brutal reality of war with a sort of savagery that was until then quite new in English literature. Now that we are familiar with this style to the point of satiety, we are apt to forget that it was Henry who led the way where so many were to follow. Sassoon, Blunden, Manning, Aldington, even Hemingway, all owe a debt to this pioneering book. It is little wonder that there are still those who rate the *Progress* - so very different from Henry's other books - as his finest achievement. In this little book, even more perhaps than in *Tarka*, every word is clearly chipped from the breastbone of painful and personal experience.

If Henry's response to the war was, initially, flight, he was not alone. In the behaviour of his comrades and contemporaries, we find similar patterns of behaviour as they roam the world seeking in vain to escape the memories and lay the demons that the war has raised. In Germany, Ernst Junger roamed the Mediterranean, in France Henry Montherlant journeyed to Spain and North Africa, while Louis-Ferdinand Celine set off on an odyssey that took him to Africa's heart of darkness and the urban hell of industrial America that he was later to immortalise in his masterpiece *Journey to the End of the Night*. In Britain, Robert Graves took off for a lifelong exile to Majorca, Richard Aldington emigrated to France and eventually the U.S., while T.E. Lawrence chose a form of internal exile by enlisting under false names as a ranker in the RAF and the Tank Corps. But there had to be a time when these pigeons would come home to roost, and the eggs they laid form our picture of the war down to this day.

By the end of the Twenties, it seemed that the world was ready to face again the memory of war, and, following *The Patriot's Progress*, a veritable spate of novels and memoirs appeared, of high quality and considerable critical and popular success. *Goodbye to All That* by Robert Graves, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* by Siegfried Sassoon, *Undertones of War* by Edmund Blunden, *Her Privates We* by Frederic Manning, *Storm of Steel* by Ernst Junger, *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque, and *Death of a Hero* by Richard Aldington; all these books gave a true and unvarnished account of the horrors of the front line and helped to breed a mood of pacifism and anger at the complacency of the older generation who had let it all happen.

But despite the pacific tone of some of these books, we cannot escape the feeling that there is a note of regret, almost of nostalgia, between the lines. "This exaltation is accompanied by a certain pain," says the French theologian Teilhard de Chardin; "nevertheless it is indeed an exaltation. And that is why one likes the front in spite of everything - and misses it." Another Frenchman, Henry Montherlant, accepts with a sort of fatalism the inevitability of war. "War," he says, "will always exist because there will always be boys of twenty to bring it into existence."

It was this underlying belief that despite all its surface horrors the war had been a deep, terrible, tragic yet noble, horrifying yet enriching time that lay behind the attempt by some of its survivors to make permanent the ephemeral experience of the front. They saw the war as a demonstration that "the nation was stronger than class, that reason was weaker than instinct and feeling, that action was superior and independent of thought. That nothing great could be accomplished without suffering and sacrifice, that daring elites would always triumph over daunted masses, that conflict was endemic to mankind and that life could never be divorced from death. They had learned that strife was the midwife of virtue and combat the ladder by which men of merit raised themselves from the mediocrity of the masses".[6] They could not throw off the memories of the war because the war was the moment when their lives had seemed to be most real. They saw the front line as the ideal model for a society: an ordered community whose strongest value would be comradeship.

It is this bundle of beliefs that formed the ideology of Fascism, the great temptation of the generation of 1914. It is no accident that the Fascist leaders were men from the front lines: Hitler, Goering and Rohm in Germany, Mussolini and D'Annunzio in Italy, Mosley in Britain, and de la Roque and Darnand in France. It is also no surprise that Henry Williamson followed his leaders down the road to Fascism. For he too shared the sense of betrayal as he watched millions of ex-servicemen rotting on the dole, saw the profiteers who had got rich on the spoils of war way even fatter on the export of capital to foreign lands. To a patriotic son of the middle class, Communism could make no appeal. Perhaps it is only with the hindsight of history, knowing the terrible destination where Fascism led, that any of us have a right to condemn the choice that Williamson made, along with so many of his comrades. Perhaps the most serious charge that can be laid at his door and those of thousands like him is an idealism amounting to naivety. They willed peace and reconciliation so strongly that they wilfully blinded themselves to other evils that proved even more ghastly than war. They did not see that the choice is always between Verdun and Dachau, between suffering and servitude.

But we cannot leave Williamson here. I must end this look at him with what may prove his most lasting monument: the great sequence of novels which chart the course of the Great War, and with it, the infliction of the fatal wound on Europe's long civilisation.

For if he saw the great causes for which he and his comrades had

fought disappear in the abyss of the second war; if he saw his nation ruined and spoiled, his beloved countryside desecrated and neglected, he also lived to write *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*, in which so many broken threads are tied together to present the world of his youth - as far as possible - without distorting shadows. In these volumes, especially the early ones, he gives a picture of the war that is at once vivid, moving and true. The mature Williamson corrects the over-emphasis on horror which we saw in *The Patriot's Progress*: he is now honest enough to admit that even the Staff had their problems. Without falling into the trap of an old man's forgetfulness and taking the easy path of a renewal of jingo patriotism, he gives us an objective war in which the surge of excitement and joy as a soldier goes over the top is given due weight along with the fear and cold that gnaw at his guts. Now that the old soldiers of 1914-1918 have all but faded away, it is in every way appropriate that the *Chronicle* is the last literary recollection of the Great War of major merit by a survivor that is likely to appear. For here Williamson achieves the almost impossible: the balanced view.

A few weeks ago an authors' agent told me that the *Chronicle* is about to be re-published. This is indeed splendid news, for it means that a new generation, perhaps as doomed to war and suffering as Williamson's own, can get to know this terrible, awkward, but above all honest work.

Let us leave the generation of 1914 here then; drained of hatred and bitterness, purged of false emotion and tried by fire, they have, through their suffering and sacrifice, and through the work of Williamson and the other survivors, achieved the only sort of immortality that would have mattered to them: redemption and comradeship. Dead under the fields of Flanders and France, they are united now, the old soldiers; beyond weeping, they are at last comrades and "friends in ancient sunlight".

REFERENCES

1 Rupert Brooke, 'Peace'

2 Rupert Brooke, 'Peace'

3 Rupert Brooke, 'The Soldier'

4 C.H. Sorley, 'Untitled'

5 Henry Williamson. *The Patriot's Progress*, Macdonald and Janes, 1968, p. 117

6 Robert Wohl. *The Generation of 1914*, Weidenfeld, 1977