

Road to the Somme — Personal journal and sketches

Margaret White

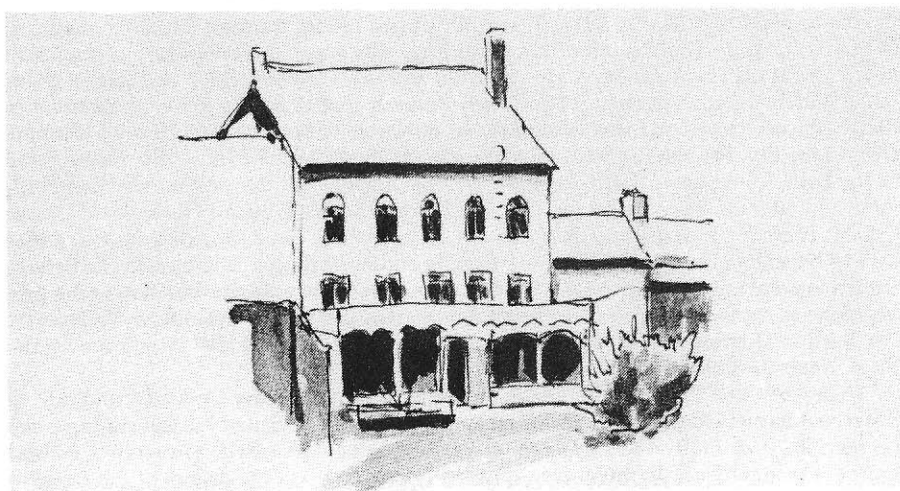
MONDAY 6th April. Writing this sitting up in bed at Talbot House, Poperinghe — where Toc H was founded by Tubby Clayton, and as mentioned in HW's *Chronicle*. A lovely town house, overseen by Jacque, a real-life TinTin. Upstairs a chapel in the hops loft used by the soldiers in the War, to be visited tomorrow. Phillip visited the chapel with Westy — did Henry visit it too? Downstairs the ghost of Tubby Clayton — Peter, after too much whisky, is haunting the rooms!

We had a smooth crossing, entertained by tales of Fred's toothache on the Nile, then flat country around Calais to St Omer and the Mammouth Supermarket for supplies. The sky midnight blue, brilliant sunshine at times on the red-tiled roofs and white walls of scattered farmhouses.

On the way to Talbot House we stopped at our first cemetery at Lijssenthoek — many, many graves — the French with crosses, the Germans with flat-topped white stones, and the British with white curved-top memorials. Some marked the graves of several soldiers, buried where they fell, others individual graves — a waste of so many lives.

A very brief stop at Talbot House before we jumped back into the bus to be at the Menin Gate at Ypres for 8 pm, for the sounding of the last post. As we stood under the enormous archway, exactly at 8 pm two gendarmes stepped out into the road to stop the traffic, as they do every night. Two buglers followed them to call the last post. We stood in silence to remember the dead of all countries, whose names were listed among the many thousands who had no known grave. Those with a known grave must be few in number — so many were listed as missing, believed dead.

Members of the group very knowledgeable on various aspects of HW's work — feel very ignorant, but learning fast! Everyone very jolly.



Back view of Talbot House, Poperinghe

TUESDAY 7th April. Writing this at midnight after a very long day.

First stop was the museum in the Cloth Hall at Ypres, where Phillip was billeted briefly. All the buildings in Ypres were destroyed — yet it still looks like a medieval town. A model of a first aid post with horses and men being sucked down by the mud captured the feeling of what it must have been like, making me feel ill at the thought. And the waterlogged fields we passed on the road — it was easy to see how the flat Flanders plain became a quagmire.

To Essex Farm cemetery, where the poem which bound the image of poppies to death in Flanders for ever was written by Gordon MacCrae. The concrete dugouts in the sides of the canal had been the front line.

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

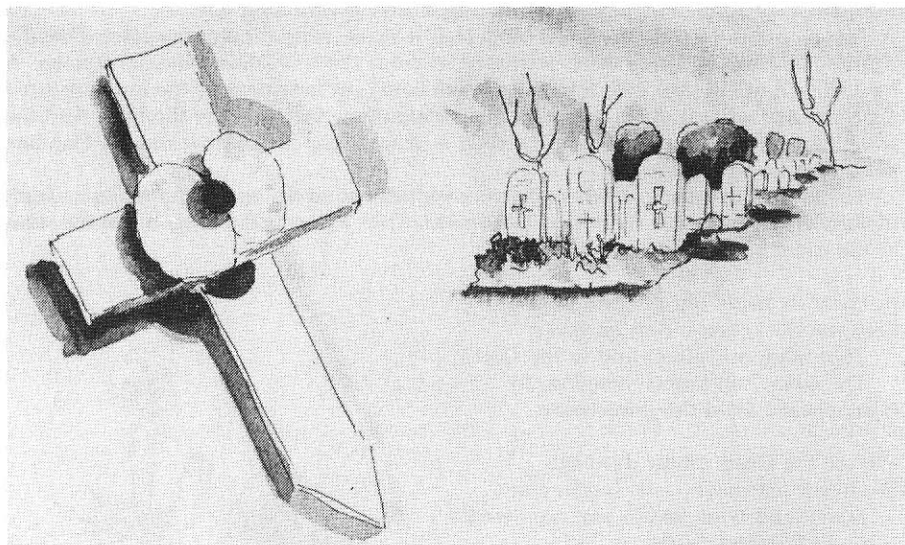


HW writes of Phillip looking out of the train window and seeing thousands and thousands of wooden crosses stretching across the fields. Many of those at Langemarck were unknown soldiers.

Some of the party were concerned because on the German graves the Christian name was given, while on the English ones only the initials. Don't really know why this should be, except that in death they were still in the army, and were recorded on their graves as they would have been in the army records. Somehow it seemed to make it rather impersonal when only initials were given — to see the names and ages of the German soldiers made them seem more real.

Cold and blowy, rain at times but with some sunshine. The country is very flat — so the least bump becomes a vantage point. The thing that surprised me most was how close together all the places are — the distances covered in battle are very small in reality. In the novels Phillip finds his way around without too much difficulty, and I had always wondered how he managed this — but having seen the country, it is understandable, as there are very few farms and cottages, the fields are very open, and the tracks and roads are straight.

Tyne Cot Cemetery was our lunch stop. We generally seemed to have our lunch at a cemetery! The War Graves Commission keep all the cemeteries in immaculate condition, each gravestone in its bed of flowers or plants, each carefully tended. At one cemetery, two little old men were busy weeding. When we spoke to them, assuming



they were Belgian, they surprisingly were English, and they had been working in Belgium in the cemeteries for over 40 years. Yet they still spoke of Portsmouth as home.

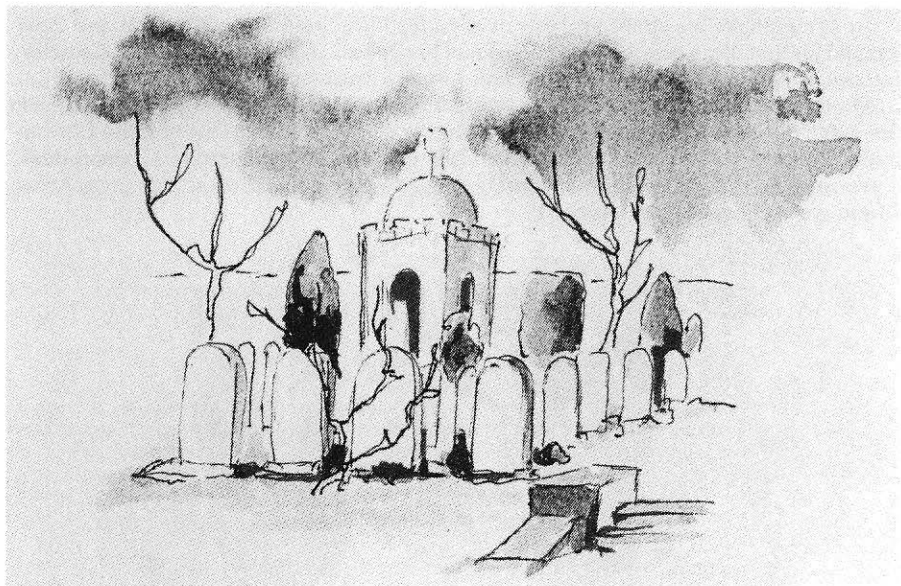
Managed two sketches at Tyne Cot, crouching under the archway in the drizzle — generally had to do my sketches when we stopped long enough, which generally meant at meal times! Appointed Official War Artist — everyone quite happy for me to absent myself at times to do a sketch — but only wish the end results were better, and also that I'd started doing them sooner — but it always takes a day or two to get over my embarrassment at doing them at all, and I only overcome this when my desire to draw what I'm seeing becomes too great to be put off.

We can't take in the enormous numbers of dead — quite unimaginable — but Paul, our Boy General, makes them into people. They aren't names on stones to him, but people with interesting lives and he cares for them. His little crosses are put by special graves — and he grieves when relatives have obviously not visited the graves since his own last visit — propped up by the grave is his own faded wooden cross with its poppy, a memory from his previous visit.

The German cemetery at Langemarck was watched over by four powerful black figures — blurred figures of soldiers coming forward carrying their helmets. They watched over the huge mass grave where thousands of German soldiers were buried. Very much regretted the lack of time to draw these four black figures.

Sanctuary Wood, with some of the original communication tunnels and trenches, was a moving experience. Everything was on a much smaller scale than one imagines from reading. The trenches seemed small, the wood a thicket rather than a big wood — but its name stands as its own memorial. In the museum, three-dimensional photos, some of which were quite horrifying. There is something obscene about photographing a dead soldier, particularly when it involved tripods and goodness only knows what equipment. Do we need the photographs to try and understand what it was like. War Artists were not appointed until after 1916, I have read since.

Then to Hill 60, as it was, a memorial in itself, all lumps and bumps, with how many dead still there. The remains of a pillbox; a row of houses overlooking the Hill. That



Type Cot Cemetery

was another strange thing, that ordinary life goes on round the graves, cemeteries, memorials; new houses built, an onion patch joined to a cemetery, a ploughed field all round a cross in the middle.

Two more visits, to Ypres Cathedral and to St George's Memorial Chapel, before food, and then back to Talbot House to visit the chapel in the hop loft. This was visited by Phillip with Westy. It is still very much as it was described in the *Chronicle*.

WEDNESDAY 8th April. 11.20 pm — to bed at last after an interesting evening sitting round with the 'troops' in one of the upstairs rooms — talking on a variety of HW topics — Fascism, the BBC, Colfe School, etc., etc.

First stop today was the Peace Pool, the Lone Tree mine crater — this was an enormous depression, now a peaceful lake. Nearby was a small cemetery to those who were killed while tunnelling.

Then on to Messines — a rather sad, run down sort of town. A queue to enter the Museum, but this turned out to be the local dole queue. Paul had to run and get Albert to open up the Museum for us, and he then proceeded to regale us with stories of his efforts to get a carillon of bells for Messines. No ladies' loo in Messines, so Albert offered the facilities of his home to the ladies in our party — and this was an experience in itself! It was a step back to the 1890s, full of plush, aspidistras, walls completely covered in pictures.

In Armentières we spent an hour over coffee and doughnut while Paul and Brian foraged for that day's supply of bully beef and baguettes. Then on to Rue David Cemetery for lunch, passing Plug Street Wood and Routier Farmhouse on the way.

On to Loos Cemetery, where we saw the name of Rudyard Kipling's son John, also the grave of the son of Jasper Kinsman from the *Chronicle*, before visiting the Concentration Cemetery. This was a hillside of black crosses commemorating German dead, four names on each cross. I think we were all glad to leave it behind and go on to Arras, where we were staying the night.

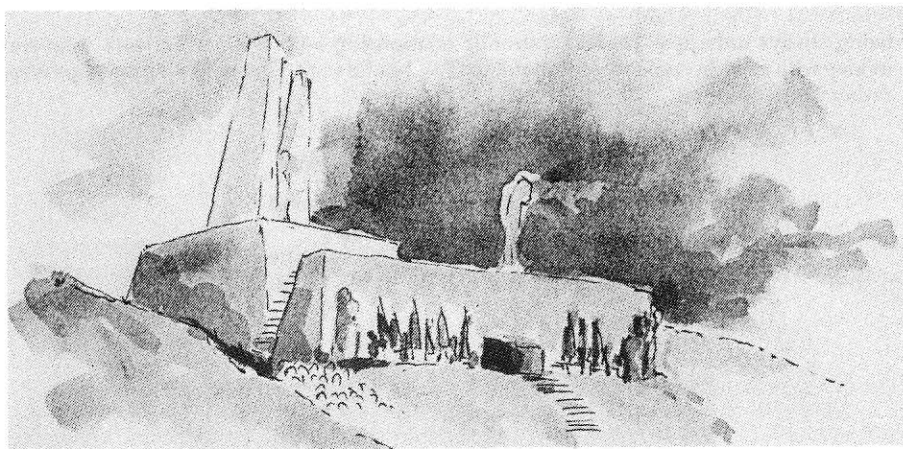


Rue David Cemetery

THURSDAY 9th April. Starting to write this in the petrol station at Mammouth Superstore at 4 pm — we've just had our lunch in the car park of same Superstore!

We have been to the Seventieth Anniversary memorial service at Vimy Ridge, the Canadian memorial to 68 thousand Canadian dead — a huge white memorial, two pillars of stone pointing to the sky, brooded over by a drooping female figure. Flags held by the veterans, bands playing, prayers, speeches, all in a huge green amphitheatre. Black clouds behind, and rain at the end, but brilliant sunshine during the ceremony. A skylark rose up singing behind me. I stood by myself as I felt I might disgrace the troops otherwise with my tears.

In the hotel that morning, at breakfast, the Canadian soldiers, all so soft spoken and gentle, uniforms and equipment immaculate, plastic white belts on dark green uniforms. They spoke so softly one could barely hear their answers. Then the French soldiers at the ceremony — the equivalent of our SAS? Small and dark — two standing near me in the crowd I took to be boys until I saw the hard, scarred face of one, and the guns held ready.



Vimy Ridge

This service is the focus point of the week's trip. Everyone, I feel, very moved by the service, the atmosphere, the thought of the numbers killed, trying to imagine this serene place as a battlefield and listening to the skylarks. A young man dressed as an engineer of the First World War, looking very vulnerable, very like the photo of HW.

April 9th is also the 70th anniversary of the death of Edward Thomas, and we stopped by his grave at Agny Cemetery. A small cemetery, at the bottom of some cottage gardens, the path leading to it following the edge of the onion patch. Would have liked to read one of his poems while standing there, but we didn't have a book with us — so one of his poems now instead:

THE PRIVATE

This ploughman dead in battle slept out of doors
Many a frozen night, and merrily
Answered staid drinkers, good bedmen, and all bores:
'At Mrs Greenland's Hawthorn Bush' said he
'I slept'. None knew which bush. Above the town
Beyond 'The Drover', a hundred spot the down
In Wiltshire. And where now at last he sleeps
More sound in France — that, too, he secret keeps.

A wreath had been laid by his grave from the War Commission.

I feel Edward Thomas was a profoundly unhappy man, though he should have been happy — he had the ingredients for happiness, in a loving wife and children, being able to walk, to write, congenial friends — and in his poetry he sounds happy and uncomplicated. But this is a long way from the truth. I feel very strongly that he had a death wish, that he went to France wanting to die. Perhaps it was the only way to resolve his unhappiness. He destroyed his wife Helen, subdued all her happiness and spirit till she became just a shadow, dependent on him for her own happiness, and as a result

being always unhappy. He had a strange relationship with Eleanor Farjeon, who was in love with him. In some ways rather like HW, but Edward Thomas's relationships were rather more spiritual.

IN MEMORIAM (EASTER 1915)

The flowers left thick at nightfall in the wood
This Eastertide call into mind the men,
Now far from home, who, with their sweethearts, should
Have gathered them and will do never again.



Before we went to Agny, after the Vimy Ridge ceremony, we saw the front line trenches and shell holes below Vimy Ridge — kept as a memorial to all the Canadians. Both front lines were hardly a few feet apart. Driving up to the Memorial through many trees — a tree for every soldier killed there?

After our late lunch in the supermarket, we went to Hermies Cemetery, where we saw the grave of the Boy General — it was after this that we started calling Paul the Boy General.

And then on to the Butte of Warlencourt. We walked up the track to the mound which had been held by the Germans for almost two years. Paul was grieved that the German memorial cross, on the top of the mound, had been knocked down. We poked around in the undergrowth for war souvenirs, though with strict instructions not to touch anything without consulting the Boy General.

Our first sight of the Golden Virgin at Albert! Strangely enough one could see the statue from a distance, but it vanished once you were in the streets of the town. The hotel was welcoming, with our jolly host and his 'Is no problem' as the answer to every query. Dinner very festive. Another good day ended.



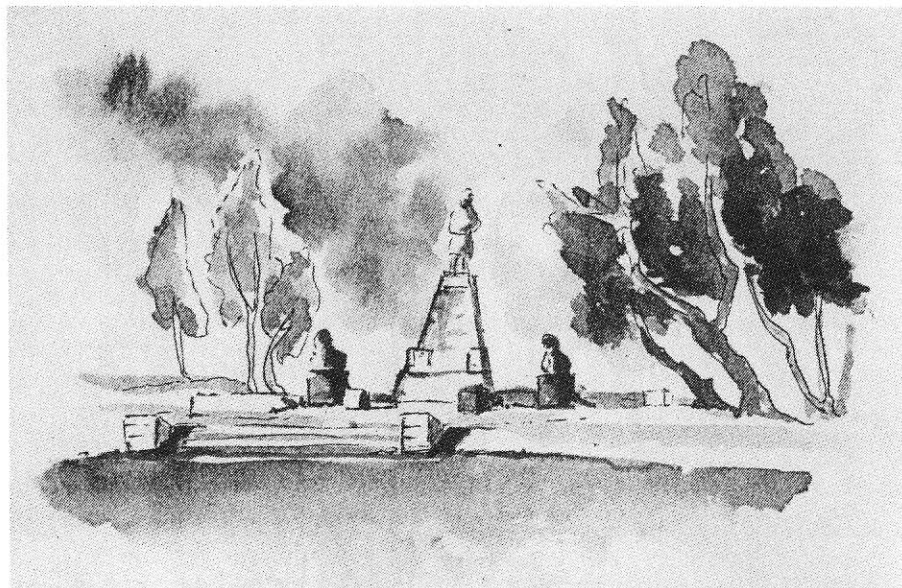
Hermies Cemetery

FRIDAY 10th April. Catching up with my diary in the hypermarket car park while Brian and Paul go to get food for today's lunch. We have all seen so much, been to so many places now, subjected to so much emotion, that some of the names are getting lost.

We have just spent some time in the Newfoundland Memorial Park — seeing the preserved trenches, again both front lines so very close together. The iron supports for the barbed wire still rusting in the ground, and pits full of old twisted metal. An artist photographing and sketching the pit — he presented Brian with a poem and scroll he had produced in memory of Vimy Ridge, but it was very sick. He had presented it to the ten Canadian veterans at Vimy the previous day, unfortunately.



The park has several memorials. A giant black caribou stands high on a stony outcrop, looking out over the valley. A pyramid-shaped pillar, with a kilted Highlander on the top, commemorates the 51st Highland Division. Other memorials are smaller. Perhaps the barbed wire posts are the best memorial. The sun was shining, with fast-moving April skies.



Memorial to 51st Highland Division, Newfoundland Park

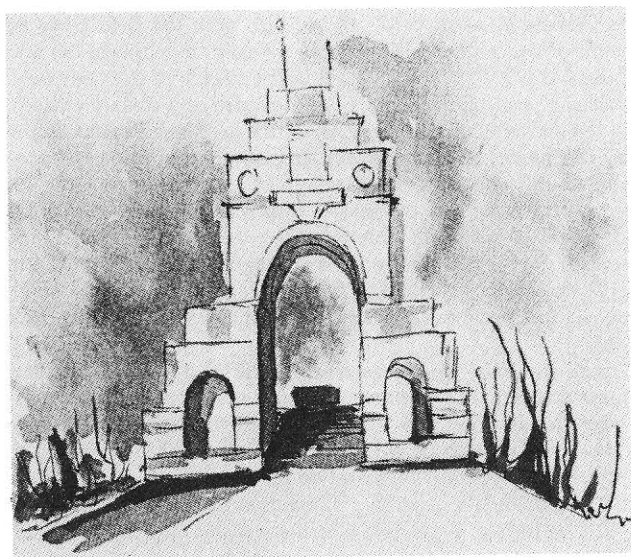
The huge red brick archway of the Thiepval Anglo-French Cemetery Memorial dominates the sky for miles around. Here are the names of 73 thousand dead who have no known graves. I didn't go to read the names, for they are endless. There had once been a village of Thiepval — now it is only the memorial.

Brian realised that he had left a much-treasured walking stick at the Newfoundland Park, and an unsuccessful return journey was necessary. Fortunately a message awaited us at the hotel that evening that it had been found, and we were able to go and pick it up on Saturday morning. So we had three visits to the Newfoundland Memorial Park.

Two visits stand out from the several we made later that day. One was to the Lochnagar mine crater, which had been bought privately, so that it remained a memorial. A huge crater, in the middle of open farming country. The second was to the grave of Charles Dickens' grandson — a simple cross, buried in a thicket out in the fields. One of Paul's crosses was already there.

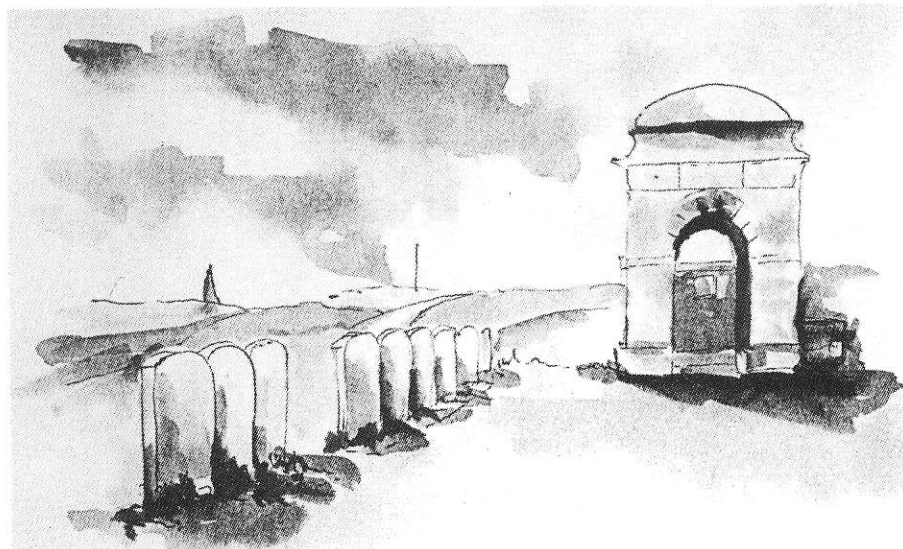
Then the South African memorial — a very modern museum, only opened in recent years. A small shop, where I bought a trenching tool and a shell cap. And we had a group photo taken of the troops.

There have been so many skylarks all week. And we watched from the bus three hares gambolling in the fields — were they Henry's spirit watching over us, as someone suggested. Henry mentions seeing hares and hearing skylarks many times in the *Chronicle*.



" -- Misty light
Shrouds Thiepval Wood
and all its worst; "

Thiepval Arch - French Cemetery Memorial

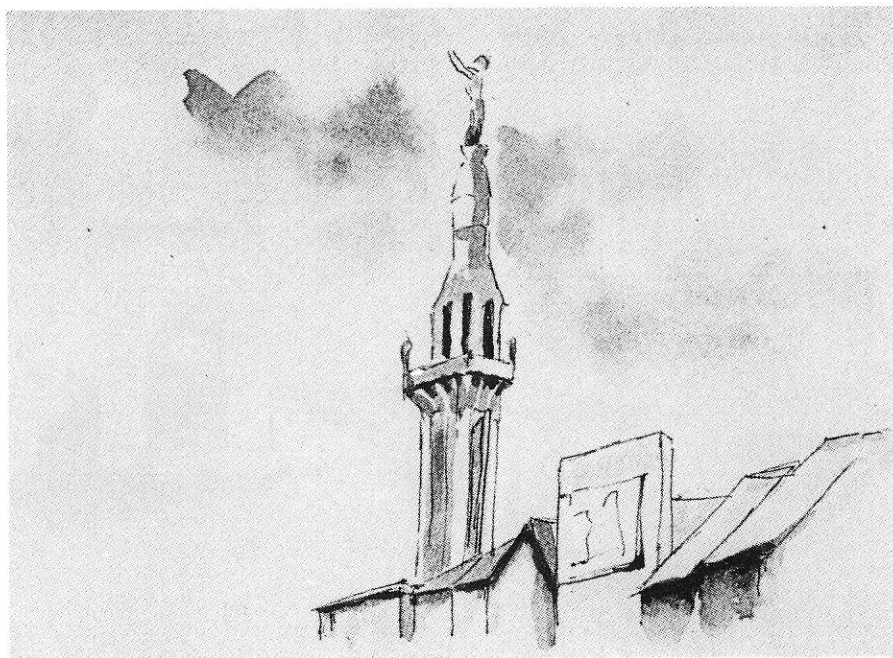


Oulliers Cemetery - Mash Valley

Lunch stop was Ovillers Cemetery, open fields all around, with the field close by being sprayed to the detriment of our picnic. This strange mixture of ordinary life and memorials to thousands of dead is what I want to show in the sketch of the cemetery. A row of graves, a stone archway, and open fields, with the spire of a distant church. Each cemetery has some kind of archway or memorial, in which are stored books listing each grave contained there. The name, the next of kin, sometimes some quotation — so many of them sons, rather than husbands or fathers.

During the day we saw several graves of interest — that of Percy Pickering from Apsley Guise, in reality J.C. Boon, of particular interest. He was only 21. It is strange how hypnotic the names on the graves are — one feels compelled to read them, and try and imagine what the men themselves were like. And the regimental badges on all the stones are interesting too — some become very familiar, with rows and rows of dead from one particular regiment.

Back to Albert for our final dinner — speeches were required of everyone, after Wheatley had spoken, and it is obvious that we have all found the week a tremendous experience. I still feel overwhelmed by the knowledge everyone shows. With HW one side of me is as interested as everyone else in digging out his past. This does add to his writings, I'm sure, but equally the writing can stand on its own, without one knowing what is and what is not based on his own life. There is a danger in getting too involved in his private life and in him as a person. It is his writing, and what he can show us about life, that matters.

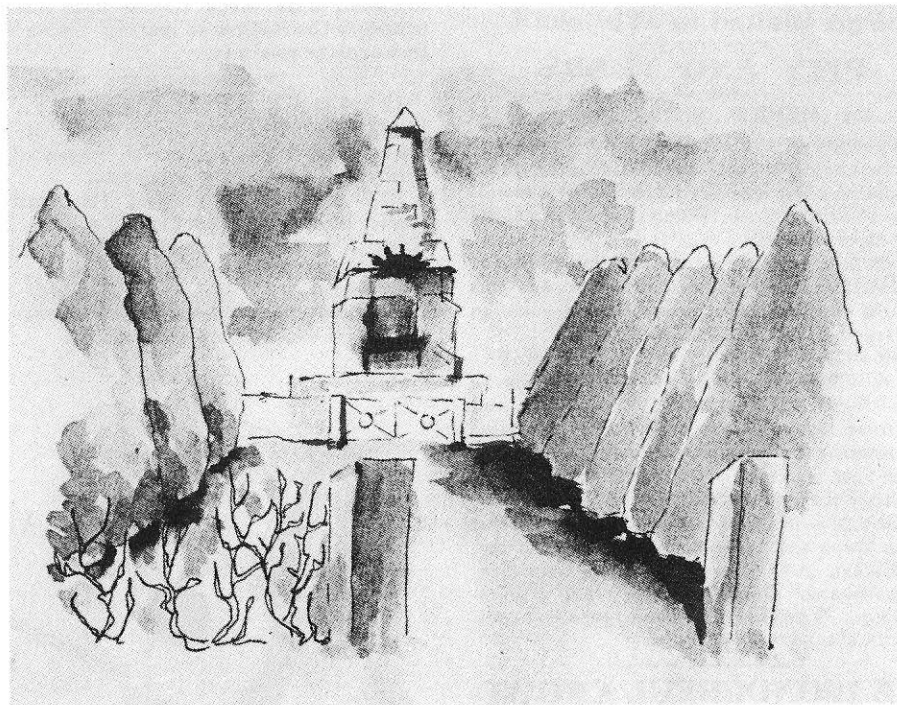


The Golden Virgin

SATURDAY 11th April. Just time before we set off to walk down to the market square and look in the church, and to do a sketch of the Golden Virgin — resting my paintbox on the bonnet of a car in the middle of a bustling Saturday market, trying to glimpse the statue through a muddle of hoardings and rooftops, all in a steady drizzle.

The van loaded up for the last time, we drove back to Newfoundland Park for the aforementioned stick, passing Bailliecourt Farm. Shell holes everywhere, shells, barbed wire in the shell holes or just lying about in the fields.

Another cemetery, this time to the Anzacs, at Pozzières, where we had lunch, before going back to the café where we had stopped the previous day, for coffee and a rest before setting off for Calais.



Australian memorial —

Pozieres

A very windy drive to Calais, with the vehicle rocking in the wind at times, and arrived at the ferry with seconds to spare for a good if slightly choppy crossing. At Dover, some of our party went different ways, while the rest of us stayed with the bus to Crawley, and finally home by 10 pm.