

The Editor has stood down in deference to:

Dulce et Decorum est

John Homan

We approach the 70th Anniversary of 11 November 1918, the days the guns at last fell silent and the killing finally ended, although pain, suffering and shock would continue for an untold number of those who had survived. Whether there will be any commemorative events beyond Remembrance Sunday (Remembrance Day having been long since dropped) remains to be seen, but it must be one of the last chances for us to see and wonder at the dwindling number of survivors of that time publically honouring their comrades of the Great War.

We know that Henry Williamson held Remembrance Day (or Sunday) most seriously as the single annual event where a Nation remembered its dead, and as a time when old soldiers recalled most privately their comrades — indeed their comrades in blood — who did not return. For him, as for most others who had served at the Front, the War had changed life for ever, but especially so for the sensitive, the poets and the artists for whom the effects remained scarcely below the surface of their daily lives in all the years that followed. For Williamson, as we know, the immediate post-war years were given over to rejuvenation of spirit and a re-awakening of his love of the countryside and nature and he wrote sparingly of the war with only two books in over a decade — *The Wet Flanders Plain* and *The Patriots Progress* — during the Twenties. In the following decade relatively little more appeared in print at least. There is a long essay, 'Reality in War Literature' in *The Linhay on the Downs*; the significant dedication in the one-volume *The Flax of Dream* (less remembered than the notorious tribute to Hitler in the Foreword), 'to All who fought for freedom in the World War, and who are still fighting'. More references appear in *Goodbye West Country*, beginning with the sad death of his friend Victor Yeates (*Wingless Victor*), who the war finally killed through Flying Sickness D, and near the end of the book a long and impassioned essay written on 11 November 1936.

As the tragedy of the Second War unfolded (even more tragic for the old soldiers of 1914–18) his thoughts and feelings are clear where his 'Author's Note' to *The Story of a Norfolk Farm* is significantly dated, '11 November 1940'. Yet, as we know, these things were only a prelude to the novel sequence long held in mind and where finally the Great War takes up the better part of five books of *A Chronicle* These are not easy reading — at least the Front Line sequences, even if Williamson spares us some of the most horrific detail (unlike Barbusse), they are harrowing enough; indeed some have complained that as old age approached he became preoccupied with war memories. I do not think this is necessarily true, but rather that it was, for him, the right moment for the flood-gates to open, and is not therefore strange. It was John Buchan who wrote very truly:

Time . . . I (would) declare my belief that it preserves and quickens rather than destroys. An experience especially in youth, is quickly overlaid by others, and is not at the moment fully comprehended. But it is overlaid not lost. Time hurries it from us, but also keeps it in store, and it can later be recaptured and amplified by memory.

(Buchan, John *Memory Hold the Door* H & S, 1940, p. 7)

Thus Henry strove through these novels to record the causes and effects of war resurgent in his mind, and propounded how man might attempt to live and enjoy an enduring peace by bringing love and understanding to the loveless for they are the promoters of war.