

Henry Williamson and the Battles of the Somme

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This piece was written as part of the information pack that accompanied the Tour of the Somme Battlefields that members of the Society undertook in July 1990. It is reproduced here to provide background information for the original battles and to act as a guide to John Gregory's atmospheric account of the tour.

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It is somewhat surprising that even after seventy years the ancient battlefields of the First World War still draw each year, thousands of pilgrims curious to see for themselves the nature of the landscape over which such horrific and bloody campaigns were fought. The Ypres Salient, bastion of the Channel Ports, Passchendaele, where once men feared the risk of drowning in a sea of mud almost as much as the dangers of machine-gun bullets or shell-blast. Southwards lie the vast flat plains and pinnacled slag heaps of Loos and Arras, bordered by the pine-clad slopes of Vimy.

The mud and utter desolation of the Crater Zone has long since been smoothed and softened by more than half a century of sowing and harvest. Modern buildings have arisen out of devastated town, village, and farm. There are, of course, many places where the ancient scars of war may still be seen. Old trench systems and dimpled banks, grass-grown. Shattered pillbox and battered dug-out half buried in the undergrowth and briar of young woodland, grown up out of the acres of blasted, splintered trunks, all that remained of the tall trees that last grew there in August 1914. These relics and the beautiful green garden cemeteries, with their countless rows of headstones dedicated to the fallen, are all we have left to remind us of terrible far-off days and the monstrous battles that raged there.

All these historic sites have their legends of courage and sacrifice, triumph and disaster but few names stir the blood or quicken the imagination so much as that vast sweep of rolling chalk downland and green river valleys of Picardy through which flow the rivers of Ancre and Somme. For it was here, on a glorious sunbright summer's morning, that thousands of brave, wide-eyed young hopefuls of Kitchener's New Army came forth up out of their trenches to walk, heavy-laden through the knee-high meadow grass and wild flowers of No Man's Land towards the German front line. Within seconds of setting out the slow moving lines of men were met with deadly gunfire that scythed down wave after wave of on-coming struggling men like stalks of golden corn at harvest time. Thus began the slaughter of the First Battle of the Somme.

The most southerly objective of the British on that first day of July 1916 was the little town of Bapaume. It was, however, to be another five months of fierce and bloody conflict during which the allied troops struggled through the long weeks of summer and autumn, losing in the process one hundred and fifty thousand men killed, before the battles finally ground to a halt amid the mud and frost of November, and the battered town had still not been wrested from the Germans. In the relentless process of attrition, battalion after battalion was poured into the fiery maelstrom in an effort to close gaps left by the ever-rising casualty lists. The lifeblood of the men of the raw but valiant Kitchener's Army was steadily drained on those awful killing fields of Picardy.

July the First 1916 is still known as the blackest day in the history of the British Army. Because of the patriotic fervour, which back in 1914 had gripped men both young and old, who queued patiently for hours just for the chance to enlist in the newly-formed 'Pals' battalions, by the time the war ended there were few homes back in 'Blighty' that were not closely affected by the loss of a loved one. This sense of loss down the years touches us still. For in the ranks of those brave companies who climbed up and

out over the sandbags into the sunlight, were men from all walks of life: teachers, lawyers, doctors, statesmen, lords and priests, engineers and poets. All had so much yet to give but, alas, they were killed or maimed before the world had a chance to make use of their gifts. But the story of the Somme battles is not all one of disaster and tragedy. After the horrific losses of the early days of action, skilful leadership, courage and determination began to turn the tide. The Germans were firmly entrenched in carefully constructed and heavily defended hilltop positions with even the smallest village converted into a fortress. Every foot of ground taken from the Germans was paid for dearly in terms of human suffering and the War Diaries of the many regiments who fought there, record great deeds of heroism and sacrifice that gained the heights of Ancre and Thiepval.

The quiet countryside of Picardy today at first glance betrays few clues to past ravage and devastation that laid to waste village and farm. However, in field, copse and woodland the debris of war may still be found and great care must be taken not to handle the rusted but highly dangerous live shells, mortar-bombs and grenades that are frequently discovered there. In the spring when fields are under the plough, the old trench lines of the Schwaben Redoubt and Fortress Thiepval may be observed as chalk marks on the furrowed ground.

In order to recapture something of the 'Spirit of Place' and drama of those fearful times and also to try and understand more fully the unique qualities and courage of the men on both sides, we must needs turn for enlightenment to books written about the Great War. For the reader, selection can be difficult with so many titles available to choose from: historical, tactical, personal accounts and memoirs, fact and fiction . . . the list seems endless. The classics are well known: Robert Graves' *Goodbye To All That*, Frederick Manning's *Her Privates We*, Blunden's *Undertones of War*, Sassoon's *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*. These are but a few of the authors and their books that achieved literary fame and public acclaim as being truly representative of the genre during that period of the late Twenties and early Thirties when books on the War were still very much in vogue. One author missing from that list whose books nevertheless encapsulate all that is finest in war literature, did not begin writing his opus covering the period of the Great War until some years after the end of the 1939-45 conflict. This was at a time when there was still a popular demand for novels based on the then more recent World War II. Perhaps this in some part accounts for the sad fact that the writer has never been awarded just recognition for the outstanding quality of his work.

Henry Williamson had written two books about the war. In 1927 *The Wet Flanders Plain*, his account of a pilgrimage back to the battlefields after the war, followed by *The Patriot's Progress* published in 1930. This stark, satirical novel charts the grim progress of one man, the archetypal common soldier, into the battle of Third Ypres. The powerful narrative is cleverly woven to link in with a series of striking lino-cuts by the Australian artist and ex-soldier, William Kermode. The book at the time was hailed as a masterpiece by both Arnold Bennett and T.E. Lawrence but, read today, it does not produce the same impact or sweep of splendour as his later war saga. Williamson's five books¹¹ which deal with the whole period of the Great War are part of the massive canvas covering the 15-novel family odyssey, *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*. The five war novels, read as a progressive historically based sequence should, I consider, take their rightful place as perhaps the most definitive and unsentimentalised account of a soldier's life on the Western Front, conveying as it does to the reader all the shock and trauma of a bitter, unremitting war that came near to devouring a whole generation. This is an indication of the skill of the writer in his dramatic use of language and descriptive prose. But the author's unique style owed much to the possession of remarkable powers of observation

and a memory that retained images crystal clear and undimmed by the passage of time, recollections of personal experience and the deeds of others. His writings are full of references to the countryside around Albert, the Ancre valley and Beaumont Hamel. In *The Wet Flanders Plain* he recounts impressions whilst on an emotional return to the old battlefields in 1928:

I must return to my old comrades of the Great War — to the brown, the treeless, the flat and grave-set plain of Flanders — to the rolling, heat-miraged downlands of the Somme — for I am dead with them, and they live in me again. There in the beautiful desolation of rush and willow in the forsaken tracts I will renew the truths that have quickened out of their deaths: that human virtues are superior to those of national idolatry, which does not arise from the Spirit: that the sun is universal, and that men are brothers, made for laughter one with another.²⁸

Only two novels in the *Chronicle* sequence deal with the Somme battles; these are *The Golden Virgin* which in Part 2 (The Somme) covers the tragic opening action of 1st July 1916. In *A Test to Destruction* Part 2 (Action) this is set against the background of the last great German Spring Offensive which began so dramatically on the evening of 21st March 1918. The two novels contain some of Henry Williamson's most powerful descriptive writing in a gripping, fictionalised account of the Somme campaigns.

We know that although the young Henry was used as a role model for the character of Phillip Maddison, reluctant hero of the *Chronicle* novels, the war service of those kindred spirits was not identical. Nevertheless, the meticulous historical and military research carried out by Williamson, supported by his own personal experiences of the Western Front battles, succeeds in bringing to the printed page a vivid record of five long, dark and desperate years of war, both in the trenches and on the Home Front, with startling realism and pathos. It is not surprising that anyone who survived such a harrowing ordeal as active service on the Western Front during the Great War could fail to be haunted by the spectre of it for the rest of their lives. To someone of Williamson's sensitivity and depth of feeling, the experience etched a nightmare cavalcade of images forever on the psyche. Hugh Cecil writes of the influence the war had on Williamson:

*. . . there have been few other authors writing over a long span of time who have been so preoccupied with the War. In only six of his major works does the actual experience of combat form the main theme — in *The Patriot's Progress* and the five wartime volumes of the *Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*. The event has also a central importance in the *Flax of Dream* novel sequence and in much of his very largely autobiographical work on other subjects the after effects of the War play a dominant part²⁹*

Although Williamson returned time and again to memories of the War in his writing, the War Novels of the *Chronicle* remained a fugitive ambition until 1954 when *How Dear is Life* first appeared. But as far back as 1928 the desire to write more fully about the War was expressed:

One smell of smoke from a wood fire — it must be deal wood, of which the ammunition and ration boxes were made — and I am back in the German dugouts above the Ancre valley at Baillescourt Farm, with smarting eyes. The memories and visions that return at the smell of a fire of a few bits of deal plank or boxes would alone fill a hundred pages; but would they truly recreate the past? Or, would they betray reality by an overplus of melancholy and sadness? For that appears to be the predominant of my psychic make-up.

It would seem that only by concentrating on certain incidents and recreating them as monoliths out of Time, and linking them in a book or series of books, can one recover a fragment of the power of the past.¹⁴

It can be seen that by holding back for so long before seeking release from tragic ghosts of the past until finally setting it all down with graphic clarity in an epic saga of family relationships, this allowed Williamson's flowering talent to attain full maturity. So that, when a start on the novels was made, this resulted in an originality of treatment and style demonstrating the skilful handling of such a vast canvas by a superb master of his craft. The War novels teem with vibrant action and colourful characters. The narrative all the more convincing because we are aware that most of the *dramatis personae* are drawn from life or are based on the deeds or actions of a fellow officer or soldier known to Henry during his service career (but, tantalizing it is and frustrating, to try and match a character in the novel with a real-life 'suspect' — identities are often cleverly disguised to blur the trail!). But what a rewarding experience it is to follow the fortunes of those heroes of an almost forgotten age. Williamson has kept his promise and ensured that 'lost comrades in Ancient Sunlight' will never die for they live on in the hearts of us, the dedicated readers. The vivid descriptions of the battles and the countryside over which they were fought, are evoked with powerful realism in the pages of the *Chronicle* and bring us as close to the horror and heroism of the Western Front as can be evoked by the printed word. The scenes and images they reproduce in the mind, shock the senses with visions of the terrible slaughter and a realization of what men suffered and endured. After having read the books, a visit to the old battlefields becomes a pilgrimage full of interest and nostalgic discovery. Each signpost along the way seems to bear a place-name that is familiar and which acts as a key to recall some particular scene or incident from the novels. The old soldier has left us but his War Novels remain as a testimony to the heroic courage of the common man, and as a memorial to the unique literary achievement of their remarkable author.

NOTES

1. From Henry Williamson's 15-novel sequence *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight* (Macdonald): *How Dear is Life* (1954); *A Fox Under My Cloak* (1955); *The Golden Virgin* (1957); *Love and the Loveless* (1958); *A Test to Destruction* (1960)
2. *The Wet Flanders Plain* (1927) Faber and Faber
3. Hugh Cecil's essay 'Henry Williamson: Witness of the Great War' (page 71). From Fr. Brocard Sewell's symposium *Henry Williamson: The Man, The Writings*. Tabb House (1980)
4. This long essay entitled 'Reality in War Literature' first appeared in the *London Mercury* (January 1928). It was later included in *The Linhay on the Downs* (1934) Faber and Faber

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