Sombre Summer Days on The Somme

John Gregory

What follows is a personal view of the pilgrimage undertaken by members of the Society to the Somme battlefield on 21/22 July 1990. I must record my thanks here to Bob Tierney, who did so much work in organising the trip; to Paul Reed, whose encyclopaedic knowledge of the Western Front, his ability to relate that to Henry Williamson's life and work and his enthusiasm in communicating it made the tour much more rewarding than reasonably could have been expected; to the Henry Williamson Literary Estate for its permission to use the quotation from *The Golden Virgin* and to reproduce Henry's letter to me of 25 May 1972 (the latter half of which is of especial interest); and not least, to my fellow pilgrims, for their company.

Apart from Paul's commentaries, quickly jotted down at the time, I have also used as sources Martin Middlebrook's unsurpassed *The First Day on the Somme* and Terry Norman's *The Hell They Called High Wood.*

Please note that the trip itself was not sombre: merely the response it personally induced in me.

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FIRST DAY. The coach journey from Calais passes quickly. I am seated on my own, reading Middlebrook's *The First Day on the Somme.* Its vivid and sometimes horrific personal recollections put me in a sombre mood [from which I was to rarely emerge]. We approach the area of the Western Front, with Loos on our right, and then Vimy Ridge, the twin pillars of the memorial glimpsed briefly through a neat corridor in a dark wood. We bypass Arras, and go through Bapaume before reaching our first stop: the Butte de Warlencourt.

This small round hillock, only thirty or so feet high and covered with scrub, is thought to be an ancient burial ground. We climb it, to find that the crest has recently been cleared, and that insignificant as it seemed, there is a commanding view of the rolling fields before it. In 1916 this was a heavily fortified German stronghold, and marked the limit of the British advance. It was attacked in sleet and snow on the 5th November by the 9th Battalion, Durham Light Infantry, commanded by Brigadier-General Roland Boys Bradford VC, MC — the 'Boy General', at 25 the youngest general in the British Army. The DLI were virtually annihilated, and the Butte, a mound of white chalk then, was never taken. The Boy General was killed 25 days later, when a stray shell struck his headquarters; while the Butte was later abandoned when the Germans retreated to their Hindenburg Line.

I leave the others on the Butte, and walk down the sunken lane in which the 9th DLI gathered before their attack. It is a brilliant, stiflingly hot day, and difficult to imagine the conditions in which they fought. Scrambling up the steep bank I look out over the cornfield, and see the Butte only a few hundred feet away, surprisingly close.

Bones and other debris are still uncovered on the Somme: only three weeks ago the remains of a German soldier were uncovered here when a dugout was excavated; while those working on the top, clearing trees and stumps and stripped to the waist in hot weather, suffered blistered skins from mustard gas seeping from the ground, which hitherto had been undisturbed for nearly seventy-five years.

We proceed next to the huge, imposing memorial at Thiepval, the largest monument erected by the Imperial War Graves Commission. Designed by Lutyens, it lists by name 73,000 men killed in the Battle of the Somme whose bodies were never found. Among

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Dear Mr Gregory

I am so sorry about my muddle. First, I muddled you up with someone else — Chichester-Clark, who again football knows. (Though the mix-up had no significance — merely a characteristic mental fault getting worse as I grow older — that I have to do everything myself — cork, tinselling, etc & find 3½ arms elsewhere.)

I find that several of the 1941 articles were embodied in my novel: & no record kept of what, or where embodied — much is vanished. The Trustees present are possibly & probably & perfectly of normal readers discovered this characteristic: also publishers would have found it a separate copyright, some thing to "look at".

No, Major Bowes — yes, he was the Company Commander of 1st Batt. Cambridgeshire Regt — who gave me a post 'Getting down to size' because of my Cockney-sureness about the Western Front when I'd served from Oct 1914 to January 1915. But there were old types, notably 'Baldersby & Baldersby Towers, Baldersby, Berks' — one later in the war was killed in action — for Baldersby substitute Formby of 7 — y Hall, F — y, Lancashire. He was about 32 years, Short, and very skilled — he was raped (with mods) by the rest of the junior officers of Hut 17 April - May - Sept 1915 Gallipoli or Newmarket.

Major Bowes was Home Service — a pleasant small 2½ in command — always kindly, a befuddled & bibliophile. The major — who entitled the ragged, was a fat, Low-Sense ballad named Catchcock.

'Strawbolt' was the (subvert) nickname of Col Heycock (of King's College) also a Lone or fireside ballad.

May I pay for the typing you have done? Also, the title of Trustees that, later on, publication might be considered. In great haste, Jim sincerely

Hy Williamson

the names are Jim Holliman, from Aspley Guise, thought by some to be the crowstarver in 'A Boy's Nature Diary'; and there, under the 1st Cambridgeshires, is Captain Formby, killed in October 1916 — Formby of Formby Hall, Lancashire. On him was modelled Baldersby of Baldersby Towers in *A Fox Under My Cloak*. At the catafalque wreaths are still laid, some by regiments, others by individuals remembering fathers or grandfathers. I walk around, looking up at the inscribed panels, the thousands of names. So many lives.

Leaving Thiepval we arrive in only a few minutes at Ovillers Military Cemetery, which is at the side of, and looks over and down Mash Valley. It is here, in *The Golden Virgin*, that Phillip Maddison goes over the top on 1st July, with Pimm and his pigeons, young Howells with the phosphorous grenades, Serjeant Jones and others. Henry seems to have based this narrative on the action of the 2nd Middlesex, who were slaughtered here on just such a day as this. It is a broad, shallow valley, with crops growing now. The German front line was on our left, close to us, the British Lines 750 yards away, just below the skyline.

I walk down the road, across into the stubble field, and look up the valley. What chance did those men have, heavily laden, advancing at a slow walk, against uncut wire and machine-guns sweeping the open valley? The commanding officer of the 2nd Middlesex, Lt-Col Sandys, knew what would happen, but was powerless to do anything about it. Wounded himself on that day, he was evacuated to England, but was so tortured by his memories that he shot himself in September 1916.

From one killing ground to another. We cross the Albert–Bapaume road, and pass what is left of the Glory Hole. This was a narrow stretch of No Man's Land, where once 'was a little of skulls on which tufts of hair remained, beside puttees coiled upon air and leather knee-boots empty save for each a bone . . . The Glory Hole was no charnel-house, for all flesh had long since leached into the chalk; it was a boneyard without graves . . .'[1] Looking down from the coach window, it is still an ugly piece of ground, pitted with shell-craters that the grass cannot disguise. Ponies are grazing there unconcerned.

Close by is the Lochnager mine crater, an awesome sight, 90 ft deep and over 300 ft across: the result of 60,000 lbs of ammonal being detonated at 7.28 a.m. on 1st July. It was quickly occupied by the Grimsby chums, before the Germans could do so, and was to become a haven for many lost and wounded men throughout that day, crawling from nearby Sausage Valley. I walk around the lip of the vast crater, along a footpath of white chalk, the grass worn away. There is a small ring of poppy'd crosses at the bottom. Sausage Valley is just to the south, a peaceful corn-covered depression very similar to its companion Mash. Such harmless names! To the west of the crater there is a long grassy ridge. This was the Tara-Usna Line from which the 3,000-strong Tyneside Irish advanced over a mile of completely open ground — before they even reached the British front line. They were destroyed by machine-gun fire, although incredibly two small groups reached the German front line, having advanced over 3,000 yards under fire. These fifty or so men were last seen heading towards their final objective, the village of Contalmaison.

The last stop of the day is in the main square of Albert, an ordinary little town but for the setting sun glinting on the golden virgin and child atop the rebuilt basilica. It has been a sobering day. Everywhere we travelled there have been small military cemeteries, by the roadside, set in a wood, in the middle of fields. Every village, with names so redolent of the Great War, is a recreation, and woods replanted; for this area was left in total devastation after the fighting of 1916 and 1918. It was somewhat disconcerting too: we had approached the battlefield from the German side and worked backwards, as it were. Paul Reed's commentaries have been invaluable, and the readings of prose and poetry that he and Brian Fullager have given at various sites have been unexpectedly moving.

Our arrival in Amiens, at the superbly named 'Grand Hotel de l'Univers', interrupts my thoughts. The day is ending, and we are all tired.

SECOND DAY. We wake to bright sunshine again, but thankfully there is a cooling breeze. The coach makes light work of the uphill slope outside Beaumont Hamel, and backs up a small track between two fields. Here, surrounded by ripe corn, is Frankfurt Trench Cemetery, and here is buried Private J.C. Boon of the Machine Gun Corps: Charlie Boon, Henry's cousin and boyhood friend — Percy Pickering in *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*. Aged 21, he was killed on 16th November 1916. His sister is still alive, but has never visited her brother's grave. A wreath of poppies is laid on her behalf, with simple ceremony:

> *They shall not grow old, as we that are left grow old:*
> *Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.*
> *At the going down of the sun and in the morning*
> *We will remember them.*

I think of the photograph of Henry and Charlie as youngsters, identically dressed, croquet mallets in hand. Henry is standing, gazing into the distance, while Charlie, half sitting on the table between them, looks directly at the camera.[2]

And now we are standing by his bones, with Brian reading the entry for 22nd March from 'A Boy's Nature Diary',[3] in which Henry, staying with Charlie, describes one of their outings. It is a poignant, sad moment. I wait until the others have moved away before laying my own single poppy in tribute.

In the field, just by the corner hedge of the cemetery, lies a rusting shell, one of many duds still upturned by ploughing. Our expert pronounces it to be a British 60-pounder. Another reminder that more than 70 years after the war to end all wars finished dangers still exist.

We move on, back through Beaumont Hamel. Just outside the village we pass a curious circle of trees on the skyline above us. This is the Hawthorn Redoubt crater, where now the French shoot birds.

We stop next at the Newfoundland Memorial Park. This small area of the battlefield was purchased after the war by the people of Newfoundland, and has been kept since as a permanent memorial to the men of the 1st Newfoundland Regiment, so many of whom were killed on 1st July: 91% became casualties crossing the 300 yards of No Man's Land. A bronze caribou on a rock peak was erected to commemorate the Newfoundlanders, and from its vantage point the British lines are laid out below like a map. The network of trenches is still there before us, grass-grown, rusty iron screw-pickets poking out of the ground where once were belts of barbed wire. There is the zig-zag ditch of the front line; those trenches just a few yards behind are the support trenches, while a little further back there are the reserve trenches, with linking communication trenches between each line.

The whole trench system is so compact, and has a depth of a little more than 100 yards. Another preconception gone. I had always imagined something on a much grander scale. The trenches look ridiculously shallow too, mere ditches. This however is deceptive, for when I walk along the bottom of the front line trench I can see nothing. I scramble up the parapet with difficulty, for the sides are still steep, and take a photograph through waving grasses and summer flowers of the view towards the German lines. In the middle distance there is a bleached stump of a dead tree, next to green foliage. This is Danger Tree, where many Newfoundlanders died: a hidden drop in the ground on the other side was an unexpected obstacle, and the German machine gunners were only 150 yards or so away . . . suddenly I lose my footing, and slide to the bottom of the ditch, unable to stop myself.

Walking across a still-cratered No Man's Land — a pasture for sheep now — I notice that Danger Tree is securely embedded in concrete. Lying in a shell crater, I can see that the hidden drop forms a skyline, a natural target. I walk down towards Y-Ravine Cemetery,

and on to the German trenches, similarly preserved. At the bottom of another shell hole there is a pile of rusting scrap iron. Paul pulls out a long heavy piece of metal tubing, and identifies it as a Bangalore torpedo, used for blowing gaps in the wire. Another shorter piece of tubing is the stem of a 'plum pudding', a mortar bomb which was also used for tearing a gap in wire defences. Many failed to explode on that July day. There used to be many craters filled with such scrap; much of it has been taken as souvenirs over the years.

Another stop: now we are on the edge of High Wood, which is wired off, and looks dark and not a little sinister. There is good reason, for the wood has never been fully cleared, and quantities of live ammunition still remain. It is also the final resting place for over 8,000 unrecovered British and German dead. From the road skirting the wood we gaze over more cornfields towards Bazentin Wood, Montauban and Caterpillar Valley. A panoramic landscape, which belies the savage fighting that took place for the bitterly contested wood. Brian reads 'High Wood', written in 1918 by Philip Johnstone. As I listen its prescient words chill me, for they crystallise the vague uneasiness that I have been feeling throughout the weekend: are we mere voyeurs, trooping from cemetery to battleground to cemetery, with a ghoulish interest in the dead of not so long ago?

Ladies and gentlemen, this is High Wood,
Called by the French, Bois des Fourneaux,
The famous spot which in Nineteen-Sixteen,
July, August and September was the scene
of long and bitterly contested strife,
By reason of its High commanding site.
Observe the effect of shell-fire in the trees
Standing and fallen; here is wire; this trench
For months inhabited, twelve times changed hands,
(They soon fall in), used later as a grave.
It has been said on good authority
That in the fighting for this patch of wood
Were killed somewhere above eight thousand men,
O whom the greater part were buried here
This mound on which you stand being . . .
Madame, please,
You are requested kindly not to touch
Or take away the Company's property
As souvenirs: you'll find we have on sale
A large variety, all guaranteed.
As I was saying, all is as it was,
This is an unknown British officer,
The tunic having lately rotted off.
Please follow me — this way . . .
the <u>path</u>, sir, <u>please</u>,
The ground which was secured at great expense
The Company keeps absolutely untouched,
And in that dug-out (genuine) we provide
Refreshments at a reasonable rate.
You are requested not to leave about
Paper, or ginger-beer bottles, or orange-peel,
There are wastepaper baskets at the gate.

Suddenly I want to go home.

On to Guillemont Road Cemetery, with Trônes Wood as a dark background — these replanted woods are so dense — and we look dutifully at the headstones of Raymond Asquith, son of the Prime Minister, and Edward Wyndham Tennant, a subaltern poet in the Grenadier Guards. A small bright wreath of poppies catches my eye at the foot of another. 'Serjeant J.A. Geoghegan, Royal Field Artillery. 16 September 1916'. A card says simply, 'I wish I had known you. Love Daughter Lillian'. I read this with a heart-breaking and deep sadness, and think, it *is* right to come here. We can all still grieve for these tens of thousands of lost young lives, which mean so much to many even today. I look at the cemetery register; it is only a small cemetery, how many lie here? Two hundred? Five hundred? The answer is two thousand two hundred and fifty one, more than half of whom have no known name.

The tour finishes at Delville Wood, with its impressive South African memorial and — a souvenir shop. Somewhat shamefacedly I buy a brass shell nose-cap, tarnished and dirty, the metal torn at the base. A tourist buying his souvenir. We gather for a group photograph, and board the bus for Calais. It has been a crowded and busy two days, and much that we have not had time to see. I determine to return one day.

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NOTES

1. *The Golden Virgin*, 1957, p. 239.
2. *The Henry Williamson Society Journal*, No. 6, October 1982, p. 31.
3. *The Lone Swallows*, 1933, p. 86.

Margaret White