WHAT WE SHOULD REMEMBER AND WHAT FORGET

By Henry Williamson, Author of ‘The Pathway’.

When the Germans decided to quit their ragged and perilous lives on the Somme in March 1917, they mined every cottage and crossroad in the battle area, cut down every tree (except those they wanted for landmarks) that occluded observation, removed the steel rails of the permanent way, put a bullet under every sheet of corrugated iron left behind, and walked away one Saturday night to their new Siegfried Stellung. I remember well the strange silence of that Sunday morning, and the unfamiliar figures of the Bengal Lancers trotting in file through our infantry outposts, turban’d and expressionless. The newspapers at home hailed this retreat into the colossal fortresses of the Hindenburg Line as a victory: ‘The German Landslide begins at last.’

At the same time much was said, both printed and spoken, about certain enemy factories in use for the purpose of making further patriots of their dead.

We soldiers in France scorned the story; we knew it was a lie, for in places in the green abandoned country between the brown-crater-scarred surfaces of the Somme and the new Hindenburg Line were to be seen German cemeteries, set with cream-coloured stones and monuments. Some of our shells at Amiens and Le Grand had chanced to fall among the tombs, disclosing long leather boots and grey tunics, and what they contained.

There were many cemeteries behind their lines in the Blood Bath of the Somme, as the German soldiers called the place. English wounded prisoners who had died in their field hospitals were laid among the German dead; equal honour was done to friend and enemy alike in death. Here rests in God an unknown English soldier. ‘Here lies a nameless French hero’—such inscriptions were frequent.

I remember standing alone in the middle of a grassy valley in that country of rolling gentle downland—a solitary grave set with the broken blade of a propeller for a headstone, with panniers and mignonneau and violet for a coverlet, raised off from the battle around the resting-place of the brave unknown English airman, who fell in combat, July 14, 1916.

Ten years afterwards, I stood and watched the German graves being dug up, and brown bones and scraps of rags, black-like withered mushrooms, being shovelled into boxes, roughly, in the shape of coffins, but very narrow. The tall blonde Flemish labourers picked them up and lowered them in, while an Englishman supervised with a French gendarme. The Englishman stood there to see that no English relics were taken in mistake, for in war time friend and foe were often buried together. ‘But not in peace-time—that time when the nations—for those minding the business of other people’s practical war—and invent new ways of death. The bones of the slain may lie side by side at peace in war time, but in peace time they are separated into nations again, each to its place—the British to the British cemetery, the French to the French, and the others to the wasteland concentration graveyard, on the bare chalk of the Labyrinth, beside the Arras-Bethune road.

The borey driver taking a load to the Labyrinth, offered me a lift; and I rode among the narrow elm-wood boxes, which rattled all the way—when they were not too tight from overloading, or to a place which once was known as a dreary German redoubt—the Labyrinth. ‘A vast and terrible sight—a forest of black, as though charred, crosses sweeping over the horizon. Planted close together, upright in pairs placed back to back, with names and numbers and regiments rigidly-stencilled on them in white paint, they stood in the bare chalk. Unwashed as thieves, they hinted that the farmer and his wife-uproot through the long spring days. You see them kneeling in the young corn, on hands and knees, sometimes with their children in line, patient and intent in the fields which reveal the past by a circular blotch of chalky subsoil in the brown earth; a bone; a shard of rusty iron; a concrete pill-box, low and square and useless in the wheat. ‘Black as a burned place, bitter and black as frost or fire, a frost of silence among the black crosses. The invaders burned and laid waste, and now their bones lie unwanted, as if disgraced, in a burnt waste.

Invaders?—Once these were men en masse under the universal sky, men who wanted to be home, but had to march where they were ordered. Even in the sunlight the place was sinister, for the vast blackness oppressed the spirit of the living. As I was going away, a motor-car stopped—stopped in the road outside, and ran elderly, man and his wife, entered through the gate. Their faces were lined and worn, yet inscrutable, as of people who have fortified themselves to endure misunderstanding. They walked a score of paces away from the road, then stopped in the sunlight, gazing round the acres of blackness; they hesitated, and looked at each other, and then walked on slowly, beginning to search from cross to cross. Black and tall and close set, nearly two of them, on the bare chalk. ‘On mother, leave the dead to bury your dead, for they do not misunderstand! I helped them in their search, but the morning became the afternoon, and it was time to go. Some months later, in my Devon home, I received a letter from the man I met in the Labyrinth. It said—

‘I am a German, an old soldier of the line. I saw the battlefields, during the War and afterwards. I met you in the cemetery of Arras, and appreciate how you felt when you saw the graves of your poor comrades of war. On the black crosses were names, empty and weather-worn, and the memory of the dead will be lasting; but the memory of the living, with all the life that belongs to it, will be gone, and all forgotten. ‘But have we the right to forget without having learnt a lesson from this most awful time? No, no, and again no!'
The Celebration of Armistice Day.

November 11, 1928.

The following services and ceremonies will be relayed to London and Daventry and other stations:

2.30 p.m.  ‘A CALL TO PEACE’
(Relayed from Traflagar Square)

The Massed-Bands of His Majesty’s Welsh and Irish Guards
(By kind permission of their respective Commanding Officers)
will play
National Anthems

‘Moreau’s Judas’ (from ‘March et Vita’), Gruppo Italiano
Ave Maria from Susie ‘L’Ariennne’ Stück
(Conducted by Capt. Andrew Harris, Welsh Guards)

‘Old Irish Melody’, ‘The Londonderry Air’
(Conducted by Capt. Charles Harratt, Irish Guards)

Hymn, ‘For all the Saints who from their labours rest.’
A moment of Silence and Recollection.

Hymn, ‘Through the Night of Doubt and Sorrow.’

Address by

Hymn, ‘Jesus, Lover of my soul’

Leading up to Pray
Hymn, ‘O God, our help in ages past’
The Grace

At the conclusion of the meeting the bands will play The Hallelujah Chorus from ‘The Messiah’

10.30 a.m.  THE CENOTAPH SERVICE
(Relayed from the Cenotaph, Whitehall)

Music by the Bands of Coldstream, Scots, Irish, and Welsh Guards

Hymn, ‘O Gladsome Light’
(From The Golden Legend)

Jesu, from ‘Mors et Vita’

‘Sernade’, ‘In this Hour of Softened Splendour’

Anthem, ‘I will arise’

‘His Majesty places his wreath on the Cenotaph’

Choir of Trinity Church, Westminster

GOD SAVE THE KING

THE TWO MINUTES’ SILENCE
The Last Post
A Short Service, conducted by the Right Reverend and Right Honourable the Bishop of London
The Blessing, The Reveille
God Save the King

7.55 p.m.  A SERVICE FROM ST. MARTIN-IN-THE-FIELDS
(Relayed from the Cenotaph, Whitehall)

Hymn, ‘Thy Kingdom come, on bended knee’ (E.H. 954)

Thanksgiving Bidding in Prayer

Hymn, ‘These things shall be’ (Songs of Praise 18)

Address by the Rev. H. R. L. Sheppard
The Lord’s Prayer
Litanies, Lesson, Prayer

Hymn, ‘O valiant hearts’
Pray for ‘The Blessing’

9.5 p.m.  A REMEMBRANCE FESTIVAL
(Concert by The London Symphony Orchestra)

An Address by
The Presiding Bishop of the British Legion
Funeral March (Chopin)
‘Lead, Kindly Light’

An Address by the Rev. H. R. L. Sheppard

Hymn, ‘O God, our help in ages past’
The Grace

Prayers offered by the Bishop of London

Hymn, ‘Nearer, my God, to Thee’
Hymn, ‘Abide with me’

The Last Post
The Reveille

The National Anthem

(The full details of the Remembrance Festival on London Programme on opposite page.)
Postcards supplied from the collection of Paul Reed
We are grateful for the permission of Tressel Publications to reproduce this map taken from Ypres 1914-18: Active Learning in Humanities.