

Letters

THE WAR WALK -- A REPLY

While aware of the convention that authors do not reply to reviews of their own work, I hope you will allow me some space to answer some of the points in John Homan's review of my book *The War Walk* (No.8) lest silence be thought to betoken consent.

Although the conduct of the First World War may not be directly relevant to Henry Williamson's work, the conflict played such an overwhelming part in his life and thought that some knowledge of it is clearly essential to a balanced view of his writing.

Mr Homan is clearly entitled to his own views of the Third Ypres (Passchendaele) campaign, but there is another side to the story. Briefly, my thesis is that it was fought at the wrong time and in the wrong place. The Ypres salient was already a churned morass, two major battles and sustained fighting having already taken place there when the British offensive was launched at the end of the summer in 1917. Flanders was and is well known for its wet climate, and an autumn campaign, preceded by a heavy artillery bombardment which destroyed what was left of the natural drainage was surely misplaced. In addition, the attack was launched uphill against positions which the Germans had spent three years strengthening with wire and concrete emplacements. They were also being steadily reinforced with experienced troops released from the eastern front by the collapse of Russia.

When the initial assault

failed to gain its objectives, Haig persisted with the attacks in the teeth of opposition from the Cabinet and his own subordinates, Generals Gough and Plumer, despite ever worsening weather conditions which made the battlefield a hell for the men who had to fight there. That there was an alternative strategy is demonstrated by the imaginative use of mine warfare in the successful assault on Messines Ridge just before the battle, and the equally revolutionary use of tanks at Cambrai just after it. Haig, sadly, was too hidebound a commander to make full or proper use of the opportunities offered by these new weapons, preferring, as he had on the Somme, a long battle of attrition in which 'the poor bloody infantry' were once again the hapless victims. Readers who want to decide this debate for themselves will find the two sides of the Haig case most ably set out in *Passchendaele: A Study in Inevitability* by John Terraine (Sidgwick and Jackson, 1977) and *In Flanders Field* by Leon Wolff (Penguin, 1978).

With regard to Mr Homan's complaint that my book does not include specific details on how to visit the Western Front and where to go, if he reads my appendix 'More about the War' he will find that this is precisely what I do.

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John Homan writes: "The appendix on 'How to visit the Western Front and where to go' was missing from the unbound page proofs from which I wrote the review'. He also writes that he still does not agree with Nigel Jones's arguments; but I regret we cannot continue the discussion in these columns. Ed.

Notes on our Contributors

KENNETH ALLSOP, 1920-1973, served with the RAF in World War II. He spent five years on *Picture Post*, was a columnist on *The Evening Standard*, and literary editor of *The Daily Mail*. His novel, *Adventure Lit Their Star*, was awarded the 1950 Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize. He joined ITN at its inception, and later worked for the BBC and as a columnist on *The Sunday Times*.

DON COOK took early retirement in 1983, following thirty years as an interior designer with a major company, to fulfil his ambition of becoming a full-time writer. His first interest in HW was aroused in 1940 when his family moved to Bideford after being bombed in London.

PETER M. HEINECKE, B.A., Dip. Ed., A.L.A., graduated in history, taught at Eltham College and primary and secondary schools in Kent and Bromley. He was Librarian at Catford School, Lewisham, from 1978 - 1981, since when he has been Librarian at Colfe's School.

NIGEL JONES was born in 1951. Since leaving school he has been a journalist, and currently works for IRN and LBC. He is now working on a study of the Battle of Messines, commissioned by the New English Library. He is married, with one child.

HORST A. RESCHKE is a public relations director and managing editor of *The ITU Review*, an international labor publication. He and his Danish wife have six sons and two daughters, and are seven-times grandparents.

BROCARD SEWELL is resident at Whitefriars in Cheltenham. He entered the Carmelite Order in 1952 and was ordained a priest in 1954. (For a full biography, see HWSJ No. 5.)

RICHARD WILLIAMSON, President of the Henry Williamson Society, lives in Sussex where he is Warden of Kingley Vale National Nature Reserve. (For a full biography, see HWSJ No. 8.)

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Bryan Wake reveals an understanding and feeling for the works of Henry Williamson that is, I am sure, shared by the vast majority of our members. Personally I do not find it necessary to reply to the 'challenge' by Richard Russell, whose political diatribe precludes any serious consideration of the questions he poses (*HWSJ 8*).

My enjoyment of reading Williamson's books comes from a delight in identifying myself with his feelings, realising and accepting what I think his feelings might be.

I would suggest that if the reader cannot accept that Williamson wrote about life as he found it, not as they, and perhaps he, would have wished it to be, then prejudice should not take the place of reasoned comment.

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