

Henry Williamson and the Kaiserschlacht

March 1918

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A Test to Destruction is perhaps one of the more neglected war novels in the *Chronicle*, yet it is full of action and describes perhaps the most significant turning point in the war. In trying to decipher fact from fiction, one comes across the inevitable problem of whether HW was actually there and were all these splendid characters he describes real people? *A Test to Destruction* appears to be one of the few novels in which characters are indeed identifiable and where one can prove — to a satisfactory extent — that Henry served in the battle which he writes about.

After the signing of the Peace Treaty with Russia at Brest-Litovsk in early 1918, the Germans found that Divisions, previously held over for service on the Eastern Front, were at last available for use in France and Flanders. It tipped the balance of power significantly and the German High Command initiated plans for an offensive in the spring — before the Americans arrived, when the weather had improved and also to allow the detailed preparations to be implemented.

By the time Phillip Maddison arrives in France, to join the 2nd Gaultshires, these preparations were all but completed. He meets up with friends from Languard Camp — Allen, 'Pluggy' Marsden and Denis Sisley — and receives a rather brash introduction to the elderly quartermaster, 'Moggers', and the 'Hun Eater', Bill Kidd. Phillip is once again at Westy's side, and he finds him in a worried mood about the situation in the front line.

But the question on all our lips is was HW there? Did these people exist and if so, who were they? The simple answer is yes, Henry Williamson *did* take part in the March Retreat or 'Kaiserschlacht' (King's Battle) as the Germans called it, and all these people existed, in some form or other. Initially, it seems that this is not the case because HW is not mentioned in the *Official War Diary*¹ as joining the 2nd Gaultshires, or 2nd Battalion The Bedfordshire Regiment as it was really known. Sadly, the parts for the months of March and April 1918 — the key period as far as we are concerned — are missing from this diary, or it may even be that one was not kept, given the utter confusion of those fateful months; the adjutant had better things to do than worry about the *War Diary*. However, according to Anne Williamson,² HW did indeed return to France, landing at Boulogne on 17th March 1918, rejoining the Battalion almost immediately. It is not clear though — because there are no records available to tell us — what position HW took up when he eventually did join the 2nd Bedfords. From the surviving parts of the *War Diary* prior to March 1918 it seems that the real adjutant was indeed 'Denis Sisley', but his illness (as in the *Chronicle*) is not recorded, and may have been missed out or escaped being recorded if it happened in March (there being no diary). Thus it seems unlikely that HW took over as adjutant — at this stage at least — and what is more feasible, given his seniority, having been promoted Lieutenant as far back as November 1916,³ is that he took over command of one of the companies as an acting Captain (experienced subalterns often did this). It would be almost impossible to say what temporary rank he attained during the offensive, but what is clear is that Williamson received no gallantry award for this action — not even a mention in despatches. A check of *The London Gazette* for 1918, 1919 and 1920 showed no mention of HW, except when he relinquished his commission in September 1919. But, as in the *Chronicle*, HW stayed in France until April, returning home on the 18th,⁴ possibly having been gassed as after the war he received a pension from the War Office.⁵

So, we have established that Henry was there, but what of his fellow officers; how real were they? Very real in fact. HW seems to have stuck to the names very closely; there was indeed a young Second Lieutenant S.D. Allen⁶ of the 3rd attached 2nd Bedfordshires. He was killed in action in August of the same year and having no known grave is commemorated on the Vis-en-Artois Memorial. There was a 'Pluggy' Marsden — Lieutenant E.L. Marsden. Denis Sisley was in fact Captain P.D. Sisley MC of the 2nd Bedfords. There was also a Lieut. J.W. Sullivan (the Intelligence Officer 'Sullivan' in the *Chronicle*) and a Second Lieutenant S. Tabor — almost every name is the same.

This is not so for the major characters, however. But given the details HW provides, it is not too difficult to work out that 'Moggers' (Colonel Moggerhanger DSO DCM) is actually Colonel H. Cressingham DSO DCM, quartermaster of the 2nd Bedfordshires. A contemporary photograph of this man, which I have in my collection, confirms that Cressingham is indeed Moggerhanger, as he is exactly how HW describes him in *A Test to Destruction*.

Bill Kidd was not so easy to track down as 'Moggers'. He is described, initially, as a Captain of the 8th Gaultshires who was posted to the 2nd Battalion after the 8th was disbanded. The 8th Bedfordshires were indeed disbanded⁷ — just before the March Offensive — and its officers and men posted to all Battalions of the Regiment. Kidd is later taken prisoner at Whitesheet and wins an MC for that action. Of all the Captains noted in the *Army List* under the 8th Bedfordshires in January 1918, only one didn't have an MC — Kidd did not have one at this stage. This officer was Capt. W. (William-Bill?) Campion. The *Army List* does not show whether officers were taken prisoner or not, but Campion was still a Captain in 1919 and that year also saw an MC added to his name. It is strange that a Captain received no further promotion — but if he was in a PoW camp then there would have been no promotion — and it is too much of a coincidence that his MC appears in 1919, as did Kidd's in the *Chronicle*. I have yet to check Campion's citation for his MC in *The London Gazette*.

Now to Westy. He is perhaps one of the most heavily disguised characters in the *Chronicle* — for obvious reasons. From my own research, there are several contenders for Westy, which leads me to believe he was one of the many composite characters which appear throughout. The first of these was suggested by John Homan and Dr David Hoyle⁸ — an officer by the name of Macdonagh. There are several Macdonaghs (with various spellings) in the *Army List* but all are either in the Army Service Corps or from Irish Regiments. One was even an adjutant-general at one point. So Macdonagh doesn't fit. Physically, the description of Westy is very similar to Adrian Carton de Wiart VC — an eye-patch, injured arm and so on, but I can find no connection here with HW.⁹ What is more likely is that HW looked to de Wiart for the image of Westy, to further disguise the real one. The two remaining contenders are both officers of HW's Regiment — the Bedfordshires. The first is Lieutenant-Colonel H.S. Poyntz DSO MC of the 2nd Battalion (i.e. HW's Battalion). His career is very similar to Westy's — he was a regular soldier, seeing service at Ypres in 1914 — but his service with the 2nd Battalion was limited, prior to 1918. By 1918, he was the commanding officer of this Battalion — as was Westy — and had indeed seen some limited service as a staff officer. However, some weeks prior to March 21st, he leaves the Battalion, is promoted Brigadier-General and commands the Brigade in which the Battalion was serving; Westy does this *during* the offensive in the *Chronicle*.

The officer that took over from Poyntz when he was promoted to Brigade was one Major Richard Owen Wynne. Wynne is, I firmly believe, the real Westy. Born in June 1892 at Moss Vale, New South Wales, Australia, he was educated at Marlboro College and Clare College, Cambridge. He was granted a commission as a regular Army officer

in August 1914, but didn't join the 2nd Bedfordshires until June 1915. He was a company commander at Loos and fought all through the early part of the Somme Battle, winning the DSO for gallantry in July 1916. He was sent on a Senior Officers Course in January 1917, but it is not clear if he actually served as a staff officer, as he rejoined the Battalion in April 1917. For a short period he was an acting Lt.-Col. commanding the 18th Kings Liverpools and in July 1917 was posted to the staff of the 30th Division, as a liaison officer. He then 'disappeared' for a while, turning up again in the 2nd Bedfordshires in early 1918. The evidence suggests he was posted to GHQ, but I can't prove it at the moment. He took over from Poyntz as an acting Lt.-Col. commanding the Battalion and interestingly, he received a bar to his DSO for his part in the March Retreat. It is worthwhile comparing his citation to that of Phillip Maddison's in *A Test to Destruction*:

For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty. He personally led an attack against some enemy machine guns and succeeded in driving them off, himself killing the officer leading the enemy. At all times he commanded his men with great skill and courage and showed complete disregard for his own safety.

(*London Gazette* 16th Sept 1918)

For conspicuous devotion to duty and gallantry. Throughout the operations in March 1918, he displayed marked courage and determination as a leader, especially at Albert on the night of 26/27 March in an attack on superior enemy forces in the town, resulting in the capture of many prisoners, followed by a skilful withdrawal through encircling enemy forces. It was entirely due to his example, courage and determination that the Battalion did so well in the face of outnumbering enemy forces. He is an extremely keen and resourceful commanding officer.

(*A Test to Destruction* page 275)

In essence, they amount to describing the same action and one should remember that the war office was rarely as eloquent as Henry's citation suggests! Many people would, and indeed perhaps have, looked upon this self-implication that HW did win a DSO as typical of the cheek and character of the man, and that he was wrong to do it. However, I believe that Henry was merely paying compliment to a brave comrade, which further supports the theory that Wynne was Westy. Wynne survived the war, being wounded (gassed?) in April/May 1918 and returned to Australia after the Armistice.¹⁰

It is difficult to say whether Wynne was the 'real' Westy for sure; knowing how devious HW can be. Physically, as a photograph which I have of him shows, he did not look like Westy and the name appears to come from one Captain H.J. West MC of the 4th Bedfordshires (killed in 1918), but he is the one individual that fits much of the description to be found in the *Chronicle*. After all, that is the only information we have to go on and the final answer to this question will perhaps only be revealed when Richard Williamson publishes the long-awaited biography of his father.

NOTES

1. War Diary of 2nd Battalion Bedfordshire Regiment PRO WO95/2042.
2. Conversation with Anne Williamson August 1985.
3. The Army List for January 1917.
4. Conversation with Anne Williamson August 1985.
5. Letter from John Homan 16th May 1985.

6. The Army List March 1918.
7. *British Regiments 1914–18* by Brig. E.A. James OBE TD (Samson Books 1978).
8. Letters from John Homan 1985.
9. The War Diaries in the Public Records Office prove this.
10. Bedfordshire Regiment Old Comrades Association Membership List 1923. HW's address in the same list is "Skirr Cottage, Georgeham, N. Devon"