

Reviews

Eleanor Farjeon, **EDWARD THOMAS: THE LAST FOUR YEARS**, Foreword by P.J. Kavanagh and Introduction by Anne Harvey. First pub. OUP 1958; Rev. p/b ed Sutton Publishing 1997. £12.99. ISBN 0 7509 1337 1

Edward Thomas was born in 1878 and published his first book, a volume of pastoral essays, in 1897. He married Helen Noble and they had three children, a son Mervyn, and two daughters, Bronwen and Myfanwy (Ann). Edward's inherent melancholy temperament and the strain of a huge burden of work, much of which he found uncongenial, led to a breakdown in 1911. The following year while still recuperating Edward met Herbert (Bertie) Farjeon at a cricket week. They became friends and later that autumn Bertie arranged a tea-party which included his sister, Eleanor. Eleanor Farjeon, aged 31, self-confessed 'as immature as a girl of 18' fell deeply in love with Edward Thomas and they began an intimate relationship. Not intimate in the sexual sense for Eleanor has denied any such relationship but perhaps the more intimate because of the lack of such an element. Eleanor was also made welcome by Helen who treated her as one of the family.

A year later Edward met the American poet Robert Frost, who moved to England with his family in 1912 and whose first volume of poetry *A Boy's Will* Edward reviewed with great enthusiasm, as he did the next volume *North of Boston*. It was Robert Frost's friendship and influence that turned Edward Thomas's mind towards his own first attempts at poetry – but it was Eleanor Farjeon's steadfast encouragement that strengthened his resolve. The Frost family returned to America in February 1915 and there was talk of Edward joining them but he felt that would be deserting his country and in July 1915 he enlisted into the Artists Rifles. Eleanor Farjeon notes that once this was a fait-accompli 'the self-torment had gone out of him'.

Edward was not sent out to the fighting in France until the very end of January 1917 when Eleanor deduced from his code of a book title 'Armed Men in Tears' that he was going to Armentieres (about par with Henry's codes!). To begin with he was engaged in duties behind the lines (he had a problem with his feet) but asked to go forward for the Battle of Arras: where he was killed on Easter Monday, 9 April 1917 at the tail end of the battle by the passage of a stray shell fired by the retreating Germans; the pressure created by its passing, sucking out air to form a vacuum, stopped his heart.

In later years Henry Williamson always felt he had actually known Edward Thomas and felt a personal affinity with him, not least because Thomas was killed only a very few miles from where Henry was at Mory on that Easter Sunday and as he recorded in his diary, he could hear the noise of that battle: 'Arras bombard-

ment intensive ... Terrific fire Arras way'.

This new edition (published to mark the eightieth anniversary of Thomas's death) of Eleanor Farjeon's memoir of the four years of their deep friendship, which uses Edward's letters and her own diaries with a linking commentary, is a detailed and poignant portrait that gives us an opportunity to gain an insight into the lives of two extraordinary people.

John Laffin, **BRITISH BUTCHERS AND BUNGLERS OF WORLD WAR ONE**, First pub. 1988, Reprinted in p/b ed 1997, Sutton Publishing, £9.99. ISBN 0 7509 0179 9

The new edition of this book appeared whilst I was deeply immersed in the preparation of *A Patriot's Progress*, the new book on Henry Williamson's experiences in the First World War. My immediate response was a feeling of extreme anger that anyone can still hold such bigoted views, and the only reason for giving the book review space is to point this out.

It has been fashionable for many years to denigrate Earl Haig – always, as the leader, the main scapegoat. Much of this criticism stems from a facile over-clever hindsight and bigoted view of events. Henry Williamson always championed Earl Haig, particularly in his essay 'Reflections on the death of a Field Marshal' (see this issue), and from my own research into the background of the First World War I have found no reason to disagree with his view. However, my knowledge is really very limited and I suddenly found myself experiencing doubts about the conclusions I had drawn and already written in my Preface to the new book. Then the January 1998 issue of *Standto* (the journal of the Western Front Association) arrived containing a highly critical review of Dr. Laffin's book – and I felt relief. The reviewer, G.D. Sheffield, had appeared in the 1997 BBC *Timewatch* documentary on Douglas Haig, a programme in which Dr. Laffin also took part. That programme had left me with the feeling that the tide had turned for the Field Marshal, that sense was at last prevailing, despite Dr. Laffin's strident protestations. Sheffield states in his review that he is not an uncritical admirer of Haig, but it is obvious that his view is a balanced and considered one.

Sheffield had also reviewed the original 1988 edition, where he (and apparently several other reviewers) found a number of 'sins of omission and commission, particularly [Laffin's] use of evidence, some factual inaccuracies and the dubious nature of some of his interpretations'. Sheffield points out that actual errors of spelling, e.g. of names etc, have still not been corrected despite the several reprintings, and continues gently but firmly to point out that research into primary sources shows that Dr. Laffin's view 'is completely wrong'.

There is certainly a small error concerning Henry

Williamson. In quoting from the 'Apologia' preface of *The Wet Flanders Plain*, Laffin states that Henry Williamson was among the attackers at Orvillers on the first day of the Battle of the Somme. Although such an assumption might have been forgivable at one time, it would not have been very difficult for Dr. Laffin to check that item in 1997. In 'Apologia pro vita mea' Henry was writing of an experience he had in the bell tower of Georgeham church when the cacophony of the bells transported him into a vision of the battlefield area of the Somme – the fighting in that area covered far more than just the attack known as the Battle of the Somme (even so in a vision he could quite legitimately describe the battle itself). It is rather mean to quibble because in the note accompanying the quote Dr. Laffin states that HW 'an infantry officer throughout the war, wrote some of the best books about it'.

REMEMBRANCES OF HELL: THE GREAT WAR DIARY OF WRITER, BROADCASTER AND NATURALIST – NORMAN ELLISON.
ed David Lewis. Airlife Publishing, 1997.

£19.95. ISBN 1 85310896 0

Norman Ellison may be known to some of you as 'Nomad' of BBC's Children's Hour from 1945–1963, and he also wrote a number of books, some of which were illustrated by Charles Tunnicliffe. Born in Liverpool in 1893, Ellison developed an early interest in natural history encouraged by an uncle. At the outbreak of war he enlisted into the 1st/6th (Rifle) Battalion, Territorial Force, The King's Liverpool Regiment. The present work is based on a compilation of his diaries and letters from that time which he first put together in the early 1920s and then enhanced with research into the archives of the Liverpool Rifles. He then seems to have had grave doubts about the ethics of publishing his book and proceeded to write to a great number of well-known people asking for their views, but still did not publish although he eventually finalised the work in 1958. Ellison held many prestigious posts in the world of natural history and was awarded a Charles Kingsley Memorial Medal by the Chester Society in 1946. He bequeathed all his material – eighteen volumes of memoirs, including his Great War Diary, to the Liverpool Record Office. From whence it has now been retrieved by the editor, David Lewis, who had been encouraged by Ellison when he was a child, appearing in a BBC 'Nomad' Nature Week Quiz in 1946, and whose father had served in the same Liverpool Territorial Battalion – the two men had embarked on the same boat in February 1915 en route to France and the battlefields.

The book is well produced and illustrated with drawings by Ellison and some photos taken by a machine-gunner killed in September 1915, whose mother gave them to Ellison after the war (who later presented them to the Imperial War Museum). A main

section is the selection of the letters from 'famous people' – including one by Henry Williamson. Written from Skirr Cottage on 29 June 1929, Henry's short letter is a little obscure and has echoes of the tone found in HW's introduction to Douglas Bell's book: 'The truth lasts ... but genius is very rare. ... Get *Under Fire* in the Everyman edition ...'.

**Tony Spagnoly, A WALK ROUND
PLUGSTREET, CAMEOS OF THE
WESTERN FRONT. SOUTH YPRES
SECTION 1914-18. Leo Cooper.
ISBN 085052 570 5**

David Lewis drew my attention to this book which contains a nice tribute to Henry Williamson – but I have been unable to obtain a review copy from the publishers. However as David sent me a copy of the preface, I will concentrate on that.

In his preface Spagnoly states that his interest in 'Plugstreet' began in 1964 when he read the series of articles in the *Evening Standard* commemorating the war by Henry Williamson, particularly 'A Return to the Wood of Plugstreet', accompanied by a photograph of Rifleman Reuben Barnett, the fifteen-year-old Jewish boy killed on 19 December 1914, who was buried during the Christmas Truce six days later at Rifle House Cemetery. Spagnoly has visited this grave many times since, always laying a pebble on the headstone, a Jewish gesture of remembrance.

'Henry Williamson left me with a deep understanding of his feelings ... [his] words have affected me profoundly and dramatically. ... Many famous personalities and writers who served in the war have pronounced on places having had most impact on them but for me, those articles written by Williamson in 1964 vibrate strongest down the years. "The smell of charcoal ... a woodpigeon calling ... the crunch of hoar frost under my feet"; these words, recalling the smell and sounds of Plugstreet, sum up exactly what the wood means to me today. ... This is the reward of Plugstreet Wood for the sensitive soul. Henry Williamson was right, the memories of the wood on a quiet summer's day stay with you forever. The atmosphere is like a magic balm and the spirit is eternal and abiding.

Thankyou for this tribute to HW, Tony Spagnoly. It is obvious that you are also blessed with a heightened sensitivity – not just because of your words about Henry, but your attitude to the area: 'hopefully this book, this battlefield companion, will not deprive you of the underlying calm and embracing serenity of Plugstreet Wood by outlining some of the more violent and dramatic events that happened in its vicinity during those turbulent years 1914 to 1918.' I am sure your book can only enhance the experience of anyone visiting this hallowed place, and on behalf of HW and the Society, wish it and you every success.