

## EDITORIAL

This issue of the *Journal* commemorates the eightieth anniversary of the ending of the First World War. Containing a selection of material too detailed to be accommodated in my new book *A Patriot's Progress: Henry Williamson and the First World War*<sup>1</sup> it is thus virtually a supplement to it. Henry Williamson's writings on the First World War<sup>2</sup> constitute a vivid portrait of that era – and are superb examples of reality in war literature.

You will see that the facsimile copy of the manuscript of Henry Williamson's essay 'Reality in War Literature' is signed and dated 12.12.26. This early date might surprise those of you who are accustomed to the version in *The Linhay on the Downs*. Henry tried without success to place this essay in several journals including *The Ypres Times*, whose editor wrote to say that he felt it would 'fit uneasily' between their covers. But the publication of *Tarka* in 1927, the subsequent award of the Hawthornden Prize and the ensuing tenth anniversary of the ending of the First World War, meant Henry was able to take advantage of the publicity to publish several articles with the war as their subject. 'Reality in War Literature' was taken by *The London Mercury* and published in January 1929. The final version which was printed in *The Linhay on the Downs*<sup>3</sup> is much expanded from the original essay and is the one under consideration in the following discussion.

'Reality in War Literature' is interesting in its own right as an example of critical writing and in showing us Henry's thoughts about the books in this genre by his contemporaries. But this major essay is even more interesting for what one can infer from its content. As I have remarked in the closing paragraphs of *A Patriot's Progress*, Williamson sets out in this essay his criteria for the book that would stand up against Tolstoi's *War and Peace*. He suggests *Le Feu* by Henri Barbusse as the nearest approximation and proceeds to compare his selection of books against *Le Feu* to their detriment. I have already examined the deep influence of Henri Barbusse and *Le Feu* in *A Patriot's Progress* and don't wish to labour that point here but rather to give emphasis to the over-ruling standard Henry makes of Tolstoi's *War and Peace*. Williamson is stating in this essay that there had not been at that point a book to equal *War and Peace* encapsulating 'the sense of reality in action, verging on the unreal ...' and the inference is, albeit obliquely and with great skill, that it would be his own work on 'war and peace' that would stand against that test. Henry, of course, already knew what he was planning to write – his readers still had many years to wait to be able to understand his inference.

Williamson came back to this theme in a more obvious manner in the 'War and Peace' chapter of *Lucifer Before Sunrise*<sup>4</sup>, where over Christmas 1941 Phillip reads the book bought many years before but never read until that moment 'what had generally been claimed to be the greatest novel in the world – Tolstoi's *War and Peace*'. (I am quite sure Henry himself read the book at the time of his original essay and that he actually re-read it in 1941.) Reading it sharpens Phillip's thoughts about his own series of novels waiting to be written and he realises that 'the comprehensive novel had not been written because he had not developed the comprehensive vision to see the war of 1914-18 and the decades preceding it as a human entity.' As the year changes from 1941 to 1942, Phillip sits before the fire in the parlour of the Norfolk Farm, ruminating over the rights and wrongs of the Second World War and he thinks of the

*writer of genius who would recreate the miseries and hopes of the times as did Tolstoi in another age, in his great novel. That Russian nobleman shut himself away for over five years and with infinite care and patience, while sustaining within himself the power to endure, set his mind to bring alive within the pages of his story the peasants and the landowners, the ministers and the priests, the battles and the sufferings, the lovers and deaths and joys and tragedies of an entire Russian generation: more, of an entire European age. There was Napoleon with his new order for Europe, directing battles and regarding the dead and the wounded – all in War and Peace ... If I do not survive this war, who will write a novel of our times, transcending War and Peace? ... He must deal truly, otherwise with comprehension and clarity, with the inner and psychological processes ... He must create character, environment and action out of a common humanity and relate all the effects of peace to all the causes of war...*

This is Henry Williamson's *cri de coeur* for the recognition that it is *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*, which encompasses both the First and Second World Wars, that it is *his* great novel series that is the answer to his own rhetorical question in 'Reality in War Literature' – who will write a book that is equal to Tolstoi's *War and Peace*?

C.P. Snow wrote an illuminating essay on Tolstoy (the more usual English spelling) in his book *The Realists*<sup>5</sup> in which we find a statement that gives a direct analogy between these two writers. Snow examines Tolstoy's method for writing:

*It is set down with the truth which was his first demand for his own art or ... anyone else's. He didn't believe in invention. In his personal and intense vision, he didn't believe in imagination. That is, imagination ordinarily conceived. What was there was more marvellous than anything one's feeble mind could construct; though one's mind could be given a chance to interpret or analyse the novel. That was his artistic freedom. It gave him the certainty of his God's eye surveillance. [cf. Henry's 'to see as the sun sees, without shadows']*

*Thus we know about his childhood ... For the military history and the social data of a period the generation before his own, he used, like any sane writer setting out upon an epic, every source he could absorb. His chief source was his own family. There, true to his credo, he invented very little ... he changed the name of his mother. She was actually the Princess Marya Volkonsky. With a daring stroke of invention, her son transmuted this name into Bolkonsky ... With comparable ingenuity, Dorokhov ... was transmuted into Dolokhov. ... Tolstoy's father Nikolai appears in the novel as Nikolai Rostov, as faithfully as Tolstoy could manage, which is as faithfully as any writer could manage.'*

So here is direct analogy, not just in the intent and compass of the two works but in almost identical method. Count Leo Tolstoy lived from 1828 to 1910. *War and Peace* was written between 1863-9, soon after his marriage to Sonya Behr, who took over the running of his large estate to free him to concentrate on his epic work. Tolstoy's preparations for the book were prodigious, as were Williamson's to be a century later.

In the Preface to his book, Snow sets out his analysis of Realism: 'In the great realistic novels, there is a presiding, unconcealed, interpreting intelligence. They are all of them concerned with the actual social setting in which their personages exist. The concrete world, the world of physical fact, the shapes of society are essential to the art. The people have to be projected ... but also examined with the writer's psychological resources and with cognitive intelligence. Both those components are features of realism.' To me, this is exactly the same thought that Henry Williamson expresses in 'Reality in War Literature' and even more directly in the 'War and Peace' chapter of *Lucifer Before Sunrise*.

With the publication of *A Patriot's Progress: Henry Williamson and the First World War* a direct comparison can be made at last between Henry's own experience and that of Phillip Maddison in the war volumes of the *Chronicle*. Now we can see that Henry's purpose went far beyond recording his own small part in that war – that his intent in *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight* was to show the total reality of war, its causes and effects, in war and in peace. But beyond that even, the reality of Henry Williamson's writings on the First World War are a testament to all those who took part in that war as lasting as the stone monuments engraved with names in every village and town and war cemetery.

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#### NOTES

1. Anne Williamson, *A Patriot's Progress: Henry Williamson and the First World War*, Sutton Publishing, September 1998, £18.99. ISBN 0 7509 1339 8.
2. *The Wet Flanders Plain*, *The Patriot's Progress*, the five 'war' volumes of *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*, and not forgetting his numerous articles on the subject.
3. Henry Williamson, *The Linhay on the Downs and Other Stories*, Cape 1934. 'Reality in War Literature', pp 224-62. Photocopies of this article can be obtained from the HWS Publications Manager (address on inside back cover), price £1.50.
4. Henry Williamson, *Lucifer Before Sunrise*, (Vol. 14, *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*, Macdonald, 1967, chapter 14, 'War and Peace', pp 22-223.
5. C.P. Snow, *The Realists: Portraits of Eight Novelists*, Macmillan, 1978. 'Tolstoy', pp 139-66.

As you will see, there is no room for explanatory notes for the items included in this issue, so I hope they are all obvious. Some are cross-referenced from my new book (as above Note 1); others are facsimile illustrations for which there was no room in the new book due to space restrictions.