Terrible "Vicissitudes": Henry Williamson's *The Patriot's Progress*

Henry Williamson's first war novel, *The Patriot's Progress*, appeared in April 1930, the same month when letters condemning the recent deluge of anti-heroic war literature (which included Robert Graves's *Good-bye to All That*) were run daily in the London *Times*. The work might have met with a more enthusiastic reception had it come out earlier. Although the war-book controversy was, by this time, at its height, the publishing industry had already begun to lose interest in war novels and memoirs, and, judging from the weary tone of the *TLS* reviewer who argued that Williamson's novel offered little new, so had critics.[1] The "boom" was over.

Arnold Bennett and T. E. Lawrence, among others, praised Williamson's novel, but the public reaction, in general, was luke-warm. Geoffrey Bles published a second edition later in 1930. Then the novel was forgotten until its reprinting in 1968. Even Williamson's admirers have tended to ignore *The Patriot's Progress* and to focus upon the war novels in *The Ancient Sunlight* sequence, which Williamson himself preferred.

Ironically, the material regarded as sensationalistic by critics of the new war literature— hopeless attacks, incompetent generals, bloated corpses, etc.—had become "old hat" by April, 1930, and Williamson's book, packed with gory details, probably shocked no one. Yet the novel deserves more credit for originality than it received at the time, and, in this essay, I will suggest why *The Patriot's Progress* deserves a place, among more celebrated works such as Graves's *Good-bye to All That*, in our canon of First-World-War literature.

The novelty of Williamson's book can be seen in its long, playfully archaic title, which promises a happy romp straight from Smollett or Fielding mixed with Bunyanesque allegory: *The Patriot's Progress: Being the Vicissitudes of Pte. John Bullock Related by Henry Williamson and Drawn by William Kermode*. The contrast between this bucolic title and the horrifying text that follows came as no surprise (Wilfred Owen had used the same technique in "Dulce et Decorum Est"), but Williamson's violation of novelistic conventions, for the sake of irony, was something new. The chaos of the Great War could only be captured, Williamson implied, in an anti-novel. The book has little character development, no love interest, and virtually no plot other than that created by the monotonous routine of trench warfare and the seemingly random sequence of battles and campaigns.

Indeed, if we apply E. M. Forster's famous distinction, the book has no plot, only a story. Events move forward chronologically, but the causal links between them (necessary, in Forster's view, for a true plot) are beyond the understanding of the protagonist, who is merely acted upon, and are ignored by the impersonal narrator, who mechanically records the "vicissitudes" without considering their origins. A battle happens. Characters die. Another battle happens. And so on. *The Patriot's Progress* is precisely the kind of war fiction that enraged critics such as Cyril Falls and Douglas Jerrold because it steadfastly refuses to consider the Great War either as a geopolitical struggle or as an inevitable tragedy. The War that we see in this novel makes no sense at all.

Far from being overly derivative, the novel reflects Williamson's considerable "anxiety of influence." The number of talented writers who had already turned their war experience into art—and the variety of strategies that they had employed—was daunting: Siegfried Sassoon had described the War from the junior officer's perspective; Frederic Manning had focused on the comradeship of private soldiers; Richard Aldington had angrily satirized the older generation; Robert Graves had portrayed the War as an existential farce; H. M. Tomlinson and R. H. Mottram had produced epics; Ford Madox Ford had applied modernist techniques. Despite these efforts, however, the feeling still lingered in 1930 that the great novel of the War had yet to be written. But what could Williamson offer that was new?

The dilemma apparently troubled him, because more than a year passed before he could complete this brief novel. In its original conception, *The Patriot's Progress* was not going to be a novel at all. In 1928, William Kermode, an Australian artist and fellow veteran, asked Williamson to supply captions for a series of lino-cuts that depicted scenes from the War. Williamson agreed, but, at some point, decided to write an entire novel "with the lino-cuts serving as illustrations" (Farson 18).

The writing came slowly. In *Genius of Friendship: T. E. Lawrence* (1941), Williamson described the composition of *The Patriot's Progress* as "tedious work, forcing one bare word after another" (37). He worked on the novel, sporadically, for several months. Then, supposedly because of the popularity of *All Quiet on the Western Front*—a book which he detested—Williamson set the project aside for a year. As Daniel Farson mildly puts it, there were "certain vicissitudes with the long suffering publisher Geoffrey Bles" before *The Patriot's Progress* finally appeared in 1930 (18).

Williamson's dislike of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, expressed in his 1931 postscript to "Reality in War Literature" (1928), derived from a suspicion that portions of the novel had been "fak[ed]," that Remarque had not served long enough at the front line to write accurately about violence or comradeship (260).[2] Having participated in virtually every major battle fought by the British Army on the Western Front, Williamson had little patience with those who spoke from limited experience. His temporary

abandonment of *The Patriot's Progress* resulted, he claimed, from dismay over the success of a work that he regarded—perhaps unfairly— as pretentious.

Yet there was probably another reason for the delay. Williamson may have realized that *All Quiet on the Western Front*—whatever its flaws—already covered much of what he hoped to include in his own work. Despite Williamson's criticism of the German author, the two men shared many of the same attitudes: the same conviction that greed had created the War; the same longing for wartime comradeship; and the same sense of being adrift in the post-War world.

Williamson, it is true, saw more positive in his war experience. He later defended English stag-hunting, which supposedly terrorized the animal, because he had discovered when going "over the top" that fear in the face of death gave way to a feeling of exhilaration and invulnerability. *All Quiet* reflected its author's inexperience, according to Williamson, because it failed to acknowledge the psychological metamorphosis that made combat not only endurable, but seemingly sublime in retrospect.

Nevertheless, the famous scene in which Paul Baumer discovers the humanity of the Frenchman whom he has killed must have moved Williamson deeply. As Paul examines the photographs of the dead man's family, he experiences the same epiphany that Williamson underwent during the Christmas Truce, when he first fully realized that the Germans were men like himself. Paul's covenant with the enemy might have come from one of Williamson's novels:

> 'Comrade,' I say to the dead man...'to-day, you, to-morrow me. But if I come out of it, comrade, I will fight against this, that has struck us both down; from you, taken life—and from me—? Life also. I promise you, comrade. It will never happen again.' (229)

The Patriot's Progress betrays the influence of *All Quiet*, as well as other war books, throughout. However, Williamson's imagination was as much inspired as restricted by these precursors. Like Remarque, Aldington, and Manning, Williamson built his war novel around a fictional Every Man, a character whose experiences were meant to represent those of the so-called common soldier. All these writers faced a central dilemma: how to establish such a generalization while simultaneously portraying an interesting and credible protagonist?

As a solution, Remarque, Aldington, and Manning adopted protagonists who, while suffering the lot of a typical infantryman, are more sensitive and articulate than the men around them. For example, George Winterbourne, the central character in Aldington's *Death of a Hero*, is an angst-ridden painter, hardly a common soldier. Yet his experiences are meant to represent the tragic history of an entire generation. Likewise, Pte. Bourne in Manning's *The Middle Parts of Fortune* shares the speech and personal habits of the officers who command him. He is just as out of place among his fellow enlisted men as Manning himself had been during his six months' service as a private in 1916.

Williamson's John Bullock, on the other hand, is an innocuous and completely unintellectual representative of modern Englishmen. As John Onions remarks, ".. .he is emphatically not a character, and even less a disguised projection of the author....[H]e is [an] archetypal son of England"(77).[3] Indeed, Bullock has little sense of self-identity at all. Before the War, he lives in a stupor, each day riding the same train to central London, doing the same monotonous work, and dreaming the same dream of a weekend holiday at the seashore.

Williamson's vision of the pre-War years is not nearly as rosy as Sassoon's, in part because of the class difference between their respective protagonists. The novel begins with a grim description of the workers who accompany Bullock on his daily commute:

> Twenty-two minutes up to the City every morning, before nine o'clock: twenty-two minutes down every evening, after six o'clock. All of them working so that their families should eat and live; some of them thinking, at odd moments, of the sun on English fields and dreaming of better days for their children; then reading their papers again...with rare and scarcely-formed thought that their way of life was inevitable, and that such conditions of fog, rush, negation of dreams, fatigue, semi- insecurity of their jobs, would remain until the end of the world. (3)

The cruelest irony of Bullock's story is that after the War he will simply be re-slotted into this dehumanizing system. The final lino-cut, entitled "Epilogue," shows Bullock seated at a typewriter with a supervisor peering over his shoulder. It is virtually identical to an illustration that appears near the beginning of the book—only now the clerk is missing a leg.

Unlike Sassoon's Sherston, who hunts foxes with his fellow gentry, or Aldington's Winterbourne, whose bohemian lifestyle places him outside of the norm, Bullock is suffocated by his place within the English class system. As a junior clerk in London, he lives on the lowest rung of the lower middle class, actually earning less than many laborers. As George Orwell later realized, such "white collar" workers were perhaps the greatest victims of the class system: their appearance of superiority over the working classes (often maintained on inferior wages) condemned them to a life of stifling thrift.[4]

Aside from a fleeting interest in Marxism—which he never understands— Bullock conforms to the respectable and conventional ethos in every way. His political ideas, in actuality, are negligible. Like W. H. Auden's "un-

known citizen,"

> When there was peace, he was for peace. When there was war, he went.

Ernst Junger argued that the War had provided a respite from this bourgeois dullness. In battle, at the center of the "storm of steel," a man discovered the elemental within himself and came away purged of banalities.[5] Williamson's point was just the opposite: that the monotony and assembly-line carnage of the Great War mirrored the grind of civilian life. His nondescript and hopelessly docile Private Bullock, a stand-in for every soldier who blindly trusted in the wisdom of the Empire, is both the perfect vehicle for this argument and a studied response to—as well as an inversion of—the sensitive protagonists in other British war novels.

He might also be a dull and woodenly allegorical figure, were it not for the intensity of Williamson's prose, which forces us to share in Bullock's nightmare. In some passages, Williamson's impressionistic barrage of details approaches full-fledged stream of consciousness, as in this description of Bullock's arrival at Havre:

> They disembarked on a quay piled house-high with rolls of barbed wire hundreds of yards long and wide as a street of houses. Listless German prisoners working among them. Little boys begging....Through the town, tramlines, uphill, ugly French girls, Chocolat Menier in blue, wooden sabots, old women in black, lounging soldiers. To the Rest Camp. Khaki everywhere. Military police with revolvers. Greenish-gray English motor cars making constant dust. A hell of a march to the Rest Camp. Dust, sweat, blistered feet on the paved road. They arrived at last. (44)

Although many critics have objected to Bullock's lack of dimension and all-too-obvious allegorical significance, Williamson's novel remains surprisingly effective after sixty years. Bullock may be a mere vehicle for Williamson's assault upon the War, but the sights and sounds of his "progress" are so vividly rendered that we overlook his lack of dimension.

Daniel Farson has described the illustrated edition of Williamson's *Tarka the Otter* (1932), with engravings by Charles Tunnicliffe, as "the perfect match of writer and illustrator" (no page number). The same can be said of *The Patriot's Progress.* Since Kermode worked with lino-cuts, his illustrations necessarily lack detail. The soldiers depicted in them are featureless: we see a sentry on duty in the front line trench, his figure half-lit by a distant flare, or a column of soldiers staggering along a duck-board in the Salient, indistinct black shapes against a background of exploding shells.

This obliteration of individual detail furthers Williamson's aspiration in the text: to capture the experiences of The Private Soldier by using a deliberately nondescript protagonist. Likewise, the startling chiaroscuro effects in the lino-cuts mirror the violence of Williamson's prose and give the text an appropriately nightmarish and otherworldly quality. Only when Kermode strays from this documentary and impressionistic approach do his illustrations become distracting , as when he adds the face of a suffering Christ to the montage depicting Bullock's amputation. Ironically, the "padre" in the text who believes that "...Christ had come again to the world, arising in the comradeship of men crucified on the battlefield" dies of "nervous exhaustion soon after the Armistice" (176)

Williamson divides Bullock's ordeal into five "phases"—the word "phase" suggesting the kind of impersonal, deterministic experience that Bullock undergoes. In the first phase, Bullock is shifted from one regimented environment into another. He leaves his clerkship in London for the Army. The second phase describes Bullock's initiation into trench warfare, which, despite the danger and fatigue, he enjoys. The battle of the Somme, the turning point in virtually all English war books, comes in the third phase. Predictably, nearly every man in Bullock's battalion falls in the attack, including his friend Ginger.

The next "Big Push" is Third Ypres, the following summer, and, in the fourth phase, Bullock awaits the new offensive with bitterness, hoping only for a "blighty" wound. Instead, his leg is mangled, nearly severed, by a German shell. He lies for hours in a water-filled crater, given up for dead, until some stretcher bearers notice his eyelids moving. Miraculously, Bullock survives the subsequent amputation without contracting gas gangrene and, in the fifth phase, returns to London.

Although Bullock swears before going "over the top" at Passchendaele that he will never "[r]eturn to hitting a typewriter," Kermode's biting final illustration shows that England has hardly been transformed into a "home fit for heroes" (137). The text itself concludes with the Armistice. Bullock is in a London park during the announcement and accepts a cigar from an "elderly gentleman":

> [A] very little boy ran up, waving a flag: and seeing his daddy talking to someone, he stopped. 'Look, daddy, look!' cried the little boy. 'The poor man hasn't got but only one leg on!'
>
> 'Ssh! You mustn't notice such things!' said the the toff. 'This good man is a hero. Yes,' he went on, 'we'll see that England doesn't forget you fellows.'
>
> 'We are England,' said John Bullock, with a slow smile. The old gentleman could not look him in the eyes, and the little boy ceased to wave his flag, and stared sorrowfully at the poor man. (194)

According to John Onions, Bullock's "proudly deliberate sentence" ("We are England") is a flaw because it gives the character a "moral stature beyond his achievement in the book." For this reason, presumably, T. E. Lawrence found the ending "sentimental." Yet it seems to me that Bullock does make progress, even while the novel depicts, as Onions puts it, the "triumph of circumstances" (80).

Although helpless, Bullock is not deluded. His rejection of propaganda, his compassion for the enemy, and his vision, on the eve of Third Ypres, of the War as "something that kept millions of men like himself in slavery" represent strides in his growing recognition of the truth about the War (151-2). Thus, a series of realizations creates Bullock's "moral stature" at the end. Williamson's point, I think, was that even the humblest soldier had recognized the senselessness of the War—and, hopefully, would work to prevent another such disaster. Indeed, the novel offers a small glimmer of hope in the "little boy" who sheds his flag-waving militarism at the sight of Bullock's wound.

Yet this reading perhaps confuses what was apparently Williamson's intention with the actual impression left by the text, which depicts the impersonality and dehumanization of the modern world, as expressed in war, with such power that the reader is likely to throw up his hands. The novel later made Williamson uncomfortable. He regretted his polemical attack upon the high command (Bullock and his companions refer to their field marshal, obviously modelled after Haig, as the "Butcher") and probably found Bullock's bleak story inconsistent with his own political optimism during the 1930s.

Williamson's confused admiration of Hitler and of Mosely derived from a single assumption: that only veterans, mobilized by strong leaders, could prevent another world war.[6] H. M. Tomlinson recognized that Williamson and many other veterans had suffered a "loss of faith in their neighbors, a loss which is called, by some observers, a revolt against democratic institutions" (220). The deterministic cycle depicted in *The Patriot's Progress*—created by deceitful journalism, economic interest groups, and class exploitation—could only be broken, Williamson believed, once veterans tore down the democracies that had bred the Great War. Hence, Williamson's extravagant schemes and seditious behavior: his plans for a coalition of British and German war veterans that would work to defeat the warmongers, his dream of a meeting between Hitler and T. E. Lawrence, and his display, during the Second World War, of the Mosley insignia, the lightning bolt, on his Norfolk farm. Few at the time realized that, for Williamson, this emblem carried the same significance as the peace sign devised thirty years later.

The transformation of John Bullock from a somnambulistic "unknown citizen" into a perceptive opponent of militarism implicitly reflects Williamson's evolving fascist ideology during the late 1920s. Though physically crippled by the end of the novel, Bullock is now ready, intellectually and spiritually, to follow a leader (like Mosley) who will lead Great Britain closer to Germany and further away from war. Fortunately, the political overtones of *The Patriot's Progress* are subdued. The novel works best as a portrait of the individual's powerlessness and anonymity within a mass, industrialized nation. Whatever Bullock's "progress" toward an understanding of the forces that have crushed him, his experiences offer little hope that another world war can be prevented. Indeed, the overlap in the novel between civilian and military life, with their similar routines and indignities, suggests that war has become the ultimate expression of modern society.

Notes

1. *The Times Literary Supplement* (1930), 5 June, P. 472.

2. Here Williamson was not alone. No sooner had *Im Westen nichts Neues* been published in Germany than a scandal erupted over the nature and duration of Remarque's military service. Ultimately, it was discovered that Remarque had seen far less service than either he or his publisher, Ullstein, let on, probably no more than a single month of fighting during the summer of 1917. See Modris Eksteins's discussion of Remarque in *Rites of Spring/The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), pp. 275-99.

3. However, one biographical connection—or disconnection—between John Bullock represents what Williamson might have become had he repressed his literary ambitions and followed his father's advice. "Dad" in *The Patriot's Progress* appears to be a malicious caricature of Williamson's own father, who wanted Henry to become a clerk, like himself, and to conform to a more respectable middle-class lifestyle.

4. See Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1958), pp. 124-5.

5. Junger presents this views of combat throughout his war diary, *The Storm of Steel* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1929).

6. Williamson's conception of Hitler, and of fascism in general, reflects incredible naiveté. Williamson saw in the German leader what he wanted to see—namely, a courageous war veteran committed to peace. Incredibly, the ominous paramilitary trappings of the Nazis in Germany and of the Black Shirts in England (led by Oswald Mosely) never disturbed him. Williamson also ignored—or misinterpreted—the resurgent German nationalism that fueled Hitler's rise to power. (Ezra Pound's disastrous support of Mussolini was similarly devoid of political understanding.

Works Cited

Farson, Daniel, *Henry/ An appreciation of Henry Williamson* (London, Michael Joseph, 1982).

Onions, John, *English Fiction and Drama of the Great War, 1918-39* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990).

Remarque, Erich Maria, *All Quiet on the Western Front* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1929).

Tomlinson, H. M., "A Footnote to the War Books," *Out of Soundings* (London: Heinemann, 1931).

Williamson, *Genius of Friendship: T. E. Lawrence* (London: Faber, 1941).

Williamson, *The Patriot's Progress* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1930).

Williamson, "Reality in War Literature," *The Linhay on the Downs* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1934).

Steven Trout
University of Kansas
Kansas