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Cicely Hamilton , Nicola Beauman (Preface)

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William was 'written in a rage in 1918; this extraordinary novel... is a passionate assertion of the futility of war' (the Spectator). Its author had been an actress and suffragette; after 1914 she worked at the Scottish Women's Hospital at Royaumont and organised Concerts at the Front. *William - an Englishman* was written in a tent within sound of guns and shells; this 'stunning... terrifically good' novel (Radio 4's A Good Read) is in one sense a very personal book, animated by fury and cynicism, and in another a detached one; yet is always 'profoundly moving' (Financial Times).

In the view of Persephone Books, *William* is one of the greatest novels about war ever written: not the war of the fighting soldier or the woman waiting at home, but the war encountered by Mr and Mrs Everyman, wrenched away from their comfortable preoccupations - Socialism, Suffragettism, so gently mocked by Cicely Hamilton - and forced to be part of an almost dream-like horror (because they cannot at first believe what is happening to them). The scene when William and Griselda emerge after three idyllic weeks in a honeymoon cottage in the remote hills of the Belgian Ardennes, and encounter German brutality in a small village, is unforgettable. The book, which won the Prix Femina-Vie Heureuse in 1919, is a masterpiece, written with an immediacy and a grim realism reminiscent of an old-fashioned, flickering newsreel.

William - An Englishman Details

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Author : Cicely Hamilton , Nicola Beauman (Preface)

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From Reader Review William - An Englishman for online ebook

Alysia says

This is such a poignant book about yet idealized beliefs and the dangers of insulating oneself from those that disagree with you. It's message is as relevant today in the wake of Trump's election and Brexit as it was to the socialists of the pre war era.

Ali says

This novel originally published in 1920 was Cicely Hamilton's blistering answer to the realities of war as experienced by Mr and Mrs Everyman. Cicely Hamilton was serving in France at the time that she wrote this novel, and we see the war ravaged landscape through her eyes. Lulling the reader into a false sense of security, the novel starts off benignly enough; William Tully is an unremarkable young man in an insurance office, small, weak, pale and rather dominated by his mother. When his mother dies – William delights in his freedom, and uses it to launch himself upon the world of political agitators, aided and abetted by his new friend Faraday. He meets Griselda a young suffragette 'his exact counterpart in petticoats' who has already spent time in prison and is a zealous agitator herself, these two ideally suited young people, inevitably marry. So concerned are they with their own political ideals and activist confederates that they have very little idea of the gathering storm clouds over Europe in the summer of 1914. They honeymoon in Ardennes in Belgium where they bury themselves in a cottage for three weeks, neither of them able to converse with the locals, and having no contact with anyone back in England they are in total ignorance that war has broken out. On the day they start to think about returning to England and the hustle, bustle and political landscape they have both so missed, they find the farm nearby inexplicably deserted. The following day outside the gates of this same farm, the young couple come across a group of German soldiers. Instantly they are faced with the brutalities and horrors of wartime as they are taken hostage.

"There, in the middle of the road, they also halted—the soldiers smartly, the captives uncertainly—and William saw the two civilians clearly. One was a short and rotund little man who might have been sixty to sixty-five and might have been a local tradesman—nearly bald and with drooping moustaches, rather like a stout little seal. Essentially an ordinary and unpretentious creature, he was obviously aiming at dignity; his chin was lifted at an angle that revealed the measure of the roll of fat that rested on his collar, and he walked almost with a strut, as if he were attempting to march. Afterwards William remembered that he had seen on the little man's portly stomach some sort of insignia or ribbon; at the time it conveyed nothing to him, he was told later that it was the outward token of a mayor. He remembered also that the little man's face was pale, with a sickly yellow-grey pallor; and that as he came down the steps with his head held up the drooping moustache quivered and the fat chin beneath it twitched spasmodically. There was something extraordinarily pitiful about his attempt at a personal dignity which nature had wholly denied him; William felt the appeal in it even before he grasped the situation the meaning and need of pose."

Over the next few days the horrors which face both William and the reader are desperate, the images which Hamilton leaves the reader with are reminiscent of Pat Barker and even the war poets themselves. However it is William's later response to his experiences in Belgium which are at the heart of this novel, his disappointment in the small contribution he must inevitably play is heart-breaking. Cicely Hamilton's powerful and enormously readable novel is an important and brilliant piece of writing not just about War, but about socialism, suffrage and the naivety of youth, and the response of the many to the threat imposed on one nation by another. How different are today's celebrity obsessed young people with their sense of entitlement!

Tania says

We first meet William as a clerk, and very much under his Mothers thumb. When she dies, he starts to revel in his new found 'freedom' and becomes a socialist. He seems unable to have any ideas of his own, so this phase of his life is down to the suggestion of Faraday, one of his colleagues. He meets Griselda, a Suffragette who is described as his "Exact counterpart in petticoats". They soon get married and it's off to Belgium for a honeymoon. Here, they see no newspapers and don't speak the language, so when they start to get a bit bored and decide to head home, they are unaware that while they have been living in isolation, a war has broken out and they find themselves in the thick of it.

The first half was very different with the author poking fun at her main characters, but by the second half, the book has descended into the hell of war.

Well worth a read.

Christina says

Like James Facos' *The Silver Lady*, this is another wartime novel that surprised. I started the novel rather unimpressed with William and Griselda's naivety and unsure if I would be able to continue following them on their journey to Belgium. While I have the benefit of hindsight -- traveling to Europe seems particularly stupid after Archduke Ferdinand is shot -- these two characters are treated with a peculiar level of contempt by Hamilton. She seems to hate them, resent them even as she chooses to write about them.

Yet once the war begins, once the German army arrives and they are forced to confront their naivety, both Hamilton's own affection for her characters and my view of the novel changed dramatically. Hamilton puts her characters through a living hell; she is unflinching in her portrayal of firing squads, brutal captors, and the desperation of refugees.

All the while, her characters are infused with shades of grey; they lose their black and white view of the world and her black and white portrayal of them. In one bewildering moment, William, who gladly married a woman who refused to promise to obey him in their wedding vows and put suffragette ribbons in her bouquet, expresses anger at Griselda for not comforting him after she is abused by their captors!

"She must know what it meant to see her suffer and have no word; he felt she might have tried to rouse herself to the extent of one little smile of comfort." (pg. 134)

According to the introduction written by Nicola Beauman, Hamilton wrote her novel while serving on the front lines of War War I in 1918. Hence why Hamilton was able to provide gruesome details about the war in her novel; hence why she might view idealism as worthless in the face of such circumstances.

To her and her characters, black and white ideology is worthless in world filled with shades of gray, and I felt every bit of William's frustration when he tries to get his friends and comrades to sign up only to be spurred by almost every one of them. I also felt his transformation from man to "Englishman" to be moving, poignant, and, oddly as it is to say given the content, a delight of a novel.

Sally says

"What he termed public life-a ferment of protestation and grievance...with all the extremist's contempt for those who balance"

By sally tarbox on 23 March 2018

Format: Paperback

William Tully is a quiet little clerk in pre-WW1 London, described as 'painstaking and obedient...unobtrusive and diffident. To his colleagues, he is 'a negligible quantity. He was not unpopular- it was merely that he did not matter.'

Cowed by his redoubtable mother, William finds himself - following her unexpected death- a free agent, possessed of a small income. But what to do now? "His life had been so ordered, so bound down and directed by others, that even his desires were tamed to the wishes of others and left to himself he could not tell what he desired."

By chance, he latches on to colleague Faraday, whose private life is entirely dedicated to social activism; under his tutelage, William becomes a regular at meetings promoting women's suffrage, pacifism and other causes. And here he meets his future wife Griselda; their shallow, ignorant outlook focussing on protests and struggles.

"They believed (quite rightly) in the purity of their own intentions; and concluded (quite wrongly) that the intentions of all persons who did not agree with them must therefore be evil and impure...They read newspapers written by persons who wholly agreed with their views...From these they quoted, in public and imposingly, with absolute faith in their statements."

Paying no heed to the greater world affairs of 1914, they spend their honeymoon in the Belgian Ardennes...and find themselves in the middle of hideous war. Slowly, as he witnesses the atrocities, William's mindset changes; a realisation that the trivial complaints they made about British society were as nothing compared with this:

"He remembered -quite plainly, he remembered - a letter writte to the daily Press to point out with indignation that one of the Leaders of the Movement had been hurt in the ankle in the course of the Great Civil War."

With experience, William renounces pacifism for militarism, but even here he is doomed to disappointment...

A very well-written novel; the author herself was both a suffragette and a nurse in WW1 France. Comic at times, as we follow the committed but narrow-minded young couple in their efforts to redeem society, the descriptions of the war are vivid and shocking. I'm not sure we really get to know William; written in the 3rd person, he is brought to us through Hamilton's eyes, and perhaps it loses a little immediacy through that. But an unusual and interesting work.

Jessica says

This is the story of a socialist and a suffragette on their honeymoon who are accidentally caught up in the outbreak of World War I. It is a very pointed commentary on the ridiculousness of black and white ideology in the face of the harsh reality of war and really should be required reading for anyone who's never had that experience firsthand. I'm glad I read it but I doubt I'd read it again as it's a bit too dismal to be a favorite.

Shelley says

Thanks to Persephone Books for keeping this book in print. Unusual, powerful story of a young English couple caught in the early days of WWI while they are on their three week honeymoon in rural Belgium.

Before their marriage, they become involved in activism and the progressive politics of their times: pacifism, socialism, and votes for women. Going to political rallies and protests together, getting arrested together, sharing a sense of outrage and social justice... They have no idea how everything will change when suddenly they are thrust into war on the ground.

I could easily imagine a modern version of this story.

Andrea Dowd says

I was surprised by how moved I was by "William, An Englishman". The book speaks to the naivety of youth and blind conviction, extremes during the hells and trials of WWI, and how life experiences can change your world view forever.

Jamie Cattanach says

2.5 stars.

Melissa says

I was not surprised to find out the author composed this novel in a tent on the front lines of World War I. The novel is a gruesome, starkly honest portrayal of the horrors of war. The author, however, draws the readers in at first with a light and satirical description of its gentle, naïve and optimistic main characters, William and Griselda.

When the story begins, William is twenty-six years old and still lives with his mother. He has an extremely ordered and monotonous life working at a clerk's office and handing over most of his weekly paycheck to his mother. He doesn't seem to have any genuine affection for his parent and when she suddenly dies he realizes that he never really loved her. Her death means freedom for him; not only does he now have financial freedom since she left him a sizeable inheritance but he also has the freedom to make his own decisions about the course his life will take.

William asks some advice from one of his fellow clerks about what he should do with his time and money and it is through this interaction with Farraday that William becomes involved with political and social reform. William leaves the tedious office where he has worked for many years and embarks on full-time career as a social activist who writes about, protests and goes to meetings about the suffragette movement, pacifism, and other socialist topics.

It is at these meetings that William meets Griselda, a feisty suffragette who shares the same ideals as William. The tone in the book that describes these two is one of gentle parody as William and Griselda appear to fight for mostly vague causes. They believe all government is evil and any attempt of a government to raise a military and train it is simply “playing” at warfare. They love to go to meetings and hand out pamphlets and consider themselves strong and tough for fighting against social injustices. They see themselves as the perfect couple and their courtship and devotion to each other is a sweet love story.

When William and Griselda take their honeymoon in the remote mountains of the Belgian Ardennes, they are uneasy with the slow-paced, quiet life of the village in which they are staying. But they settle in for a few weeks and enjoy each other’s company. It is on the very last day of their vacation that things take a horrible and tragic turn for the worst. They encounter a regiment of invading German soldiers who treat them brutally and inhumanely. I have to say that the violence in this book shocked me and Hamilton does not gloss over or sugarcoat the atrocities of war.

William, the once naïve and optimistic Englishman who lived in his happy little bubble of bliss, now becomes the disillusioned and distraught victim of real warfare. It is not a game or a joke when men are being blown apart and people’s lives are destroyed by gunfire and bombs. I don’t want to give away the plot and the fate of William and Griselda. But I will say that William’s story comes full circle and in the end his life becomes equally as monotonous and numb as it was when we first meet him living under the thumb of his mother. What starts out as an amusing story about two naïve lovebirds becomes a harsh commentary on the gory realities of warfare.

I encourage anyone who enjoys World War I historical fiction to pick up this book. Thanks to Persephone Press for reissuing another brilliant book from an important 20th century female author.

Maire says

I wanted to read this book this year as part of the 100th anniversary of WWI. I expected it to be a Persephone-like take on the war--perhaps something about the home front or about how it affected families/households. I couldn't have been more wrong. This novel is gritty, violent, and doesn't hold any punches. The first third of the book or so is so fiercely satirical that I almost couldn't take how mean the author was to the two main characters. Once war breaks out, she doesn't relent, and just throws more and more at them.

This novel was written while Hamilton was literally at the front acting as a nurse, and her incredibly bleak outlook infuses this book. It was something that I actively disliked reading, but that made me pretty thoughtful.

Adding a link to the reviews of this on Goodreads, as they've made me even more thoughtful about this book. (I initially added this to my list as part of the WWI theme read over there.)
<https://www.librarything.com/work/760...>

Rosemary says

The story of William Tully, a naive and idealistic young English clerk who is honeymooning in rural Belgium with his equally naive young bride when they are caught in the backwash of the beginning of the

First World War. It is heartbreaking in places and William's development and disillusionment is brilliantly drawn, as is the helplessness that ordinary people feel when they accidentally fall into events that are completely beyond their understanding.

Cicely Hamilton wrote this book in wartime France while working in an army hospital and entertaining frontline troops with concerts. I thought this was a wonderful book about the futility of war that deserves to be much better known.

Margaret says

Hamilton's hero and heroine are ordinary English people, William and Griselda. They meet in the course of pursuing their various idealistic causes (pacifism, women's suffrage), get married, and go to a secluded cottage in the Ardennes for their honeymoon. While they're there, cut off from communication with the rest of the world, the war starts, and very soon they are swept into it, with tragic consequences.

Hamilton gently mocks their activism and idealism, how they speak of their "war" for Progress; yet when William and Griselda are caught up in the real war, she ceases to mock, and instead one feels her great sympathy for the victims of war and a great rage against the makers of it. This is a stunning, harrowing book and well deserves to have been the first book Persephone reprinted.

Kelly says

Firstly, the forward author, Nicola Beauman, is spot-on:

The lightness of tone [at the beginning of the novel] - the satire on the squabbles and smallnesses of the suffragette movement - lulls the reading into a false sense of security; only much later do we realise that in some ways we have been deliberately placed in the same situation as the hero and heroine.

This I found to be the most interesting aspect of *William - An Englishman* - not only how quickly William's and Griselda's attitudes change toward pacifism as they are unknowingly thrown on the front lines of WWI but my own reaction to William and Griselda's foolishness and ignorance while honeymooning.

(view spoiler) This initial, vindictive reaction was short lived, however, as William and Griselda begin to understand the mechanisms of warfare firsthand - witnessing horrific acts of violence. And by the end of the novel one realizes that war, no matter whose side one is defending, changes an individual's life/perspective/behavior and more broadly - of the collective conscience - forever.

**I have intentionally chosen not to judge this novel using the star-rating system; however, suffice it to say: please read this book.

Shawn Mooney says

Hated the monstrously bloated, abstract, Latinate prose. Abandoned on page 12. Blech!

