



1 *William, an Englishman* (1919) 2 and the Collapse of Cicely Hamilton's 3 Pre-war Meliorism

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5 **Abstract** *William, an Englishman* is a novel written in a tent near the French front
6 by a 'non-combatant': the wartime volunteer nurse, postal overseer and theatrical
7 performer Cicely Hamilton. A well-known playwright, actress, suffrage militant,
8 polemical essayist before the conflict, Hamilton, nowadays largely overlooked,
9 performed here a post-mortem exploration of some influential attitudes which were
10 transformed by the experience of war. Coming from someone who had been par-
11 ticularly active on the British radical scene, the text's denunciation of social pro-
12 gress, pacifism, internationalism, and even votes for women as naive ideals may
13 appear unexpected. She drew from long personal knowledge as well as contem-
14 porary documentation to write a novel that, while not untouched by sympathy for
15 her characters, is often brutal. The collapse of Hamilton's previous political opti-
16 mism, her (self-ironical) criticism of any belief in the perfectibility of human beings
17 may come as a shock even today. But those familiar with *Senlis* (1917) might have
18 anticipated Hamilton's sombre 1919 text. 'Modern warfare is so monstrous,
19 all-engrossing and complex, that there is a sense, and a very real sense, in which
20 hardly a civilian stands outside it; where the strife is to the death with an equal
21 opponent the non-combatant ceases to exist.' The abuse and strategic bombing of
22 civilian populations, the collapse of former distinctions between combatants and
23 non-combatants, the mobilization of almost entire nations were early on denounced
24 by the writer. 'No modern nation could fight for its life with its men in uniform
25 only; it must mobilize, nominally or not, every class of its population for a struggle,
26 too great and too deadly for the combatant to carry alone.' (*Senlis* 34) Her dis-
27 cerning eye read the Great War for what it was: a conflict which was leaving no
28 domain of social, economic and political life unsullied, a total war.

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32 No war, I suppose, save this, has seen what you then might see nightly: the regular
33 desertion and emptying of a city, its abandonment as dusk came down. In the old wars men
34 fled into walled towns for refuge from their enemy; in our wars, the wall, when the night
35 comes down, is a trap that you fly from to the open. (Hamilton, 1918, 577)

36 The catastrophic menace Cicely Hamilton (1872–1952) identifies in
37 ‘Bombarded’, an essay published in October 1918 in *The North American Review*,
38 the new experience of being exposed to air raids, will have a significant dimension
39 at the end of *William, an Englishman*, her then soon to be published novel. German
40 nightly raids that targeted civilians as much as military goals, one until recently
41 inconceivable reality, were as she later wrote in *Life Errant*, her autobiography, ‘a
42 promise of terror to come’.

43 I remembered thinking, as I passed the blank houses, that here was a phenomenon unknown
44 to the wars whereof history tells us. In the old wars men sheltered behind walls and found
45 safety in numbers (...) and in walls. But in our wars, the wars of the air and the laboratory,
46 the wall, like enough, is a trap that you fly from to the open, and there is danger, not safety,
47 in numbers – the crowd is a target to the terror that strikes from above. All the country,
48 nightly, was alive with men and women who, in obedience to the principles of the new
49 warfare, had fled from the neighbourhood of the target – the town – and scattered in small
50 groups that they might be ignored and invisible. (...) And this, one realised, was only the
51 beginning of air-power and the need for invisibility that air-power imposes; what we saw
52 was but a promise of terror to come, a foreshadowing of full-grown achievement. Lying on
53 the hillside one glimpsed something, at least, of the chaos of full-grown achievement. The
54 chaos of a people (...) driven out of its towns and kept out of them; (...) kept on the run;
55 driven hither and thither, reduced to starvation and savagery. (Hamilton, 1935, 148–149)

56 In *Senlis*, her 1917 homage to a French ‘mutilated’ city ‘ravaged by the German’
57 (Hamilton, 1917a, b, 1), Hamilton had already deplored the strategic bombardment
58 of civilian populations, the collapse of former distinctions between combatants and
59 non-combatants, the mobilisation of almost entire nations.

60 Modern warfare is so monstrous, all-engrossing and complex, that there is a sense, and a
61 very real sense, in which hardly a civilian stands outside it; where the strife is to the death
62 with an equal opponent the non-combatant ceases to exist. No modern nation could fight for
63 its life with its men in uniform only; it must mobilize, nominally or not, every class of its
64 population for a struggle too great and too deadly for the combatant to carry on alone.
65 (Hamilton, 1917a, b, 34)

66 Cicely Hamilton was reading the Great War for what it was: a conflict which was
67 leaving no domain of social, economic and political life unsullied, a total war.
68 *William, an Englishman* marks a major transition in her work. Before the war the
69 writer had been essentially devoted to feminist and suffrage issues. During and after
70 the war, in light of the impact and widespread devastation brought by the conflict,
71 she was particularly aware of the real threat the use of the new military tech-
72 nologies, especially chemical weapons and aerial bombardment, presented to each
73 and everyone.

74 The war as traumatic event, and the crisis of public and private experience it
75 enormously intensified, encouraged Hamilton to share her own considerable
76 knowledge of the conflict and respond through writing to the physical and



77 emotional horror she witnessed. Her personal engagement with the conflict pro-
78 duced contemporary reconstructions of that horror in *Senlis* as well as ‘Bombarded’
79 and in *William, an Englishman*, her war novel.

80 Looking back on her long experience of the war in France, Hamilton wrote in
81 1935:

82 When you have once accepted the more than possibility that your civilisation is heading for
83 destruction, it is almost inevitable that you will slip into indifference towards many ideas
84 and interests and activities that would otherwise have seemed to you important. That at least
85 has been the case with me; I find it impossible to take any real interest in long-distance
86 political ‘planning’ of any sort or kind, (...). Unless we can master the air-menace, the city,
87 as we know it, is bound to go; on the day the first aeroplane rose from the ground the
88 foundations of every city in the world were shaken. (Hamilton, 1935, 151–152)

89 While it did not destroy some of her deepest convictions, namely her stand on
90 women’s civil, political, sexual and reproductive rights, her first-hand knowledge of
91 the realities of war, beyond anything she could have imagined, did change her
92 priorities. ‘[D]uring the interwar years, Hamilton’s creative writing no longer took
93 its inspiration from women’s rights because the war had redirected her imagination
94 to the menace of human aggressiveness.’ (Blodgett, 1990, 104) The writer would
95 then devote particular attention to the threat of the new technologies as her 1922
96 pessimistic novel, *Theodore Savage*, makes clear (Hamilton, 1922).¹

97 Hamilton did not actually ‘slip into indifference’. She was as active as she had
98 been before the conflict, but her writing reflects a transformed perspective.
99 Contrasting the experience of the violence endured by soldiers and non-combatants
100 with her previously untested beliefs and the struggle for the vote in the years
101 leading up to war, Hamilton soon criticized her own long-cherished illusions on the
102 possibilities for human progress and improvement. As both *Senlis* and ‘Bombarded’
103 expose, during the war the writer was intent on showing how the conflict was
104 affecting everyone. In ‘Non-Combatant’ (1917) she denounced the anguish
105 imposed on all those who were coerced to remain passive.

106 Before one drop of angry blood was shed
107 I was sore hurt and beaten to my knee;
108 Before one fighting man reeled back and died
109 The War-Lords struck at me.
110 They struck me down an idle, useless mouth,
111 As cumbrous, nay, more cumbrous than the dead,

¹Cicely Hamilton, *Theodore Savage: A Story of the Past or the Future*, London: Leonard Parsons, 1922, reissued with minor changes by Jonathan Cape in 1928 in Britain and the United States under the title *Lest Ye Die*.

See Martin Hermann, *A History of Fear: British Apocalyptic Fiction, 1895-2011*, foreword by Adam Roberts, Berlin, epubli, 2015.

See also Paul K. Saint-Amour, *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopaedic Form*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. Kindle edition.

112 With life and heart afire to give and give
113 I take a dole instead.
114 With life and heart afire to give and give
115 I take and eat the bread of charity.
116 In all the length of all eager land,
117 No man has need of me.
118 That is my hurt my burning, beating wound;
119 That is the spear-thrust driven through my pride!
120 With aimless hands, and mouth that must be fed,
121 I wait and stand aside.
122 Let me endure it, then, with stiffened lip:
123 I, even I, have suffered in the strife!
124 Let me endure it then I give my pride
125 Where others give a life.²

126 Deploring the abyss driven by those in power between people on the frontline
127 and those who were left at home, Hamilton does not distinguish between women
128 and men. Though the sense of not being able to fully contribute to the war effort
129 was, due to government and military restrictions on female intervention, perhaps
130 more common in women, limiting most of them to allegedly feminine war work,
131 such frustration will be shared by her 1919 male protagonist.³

132 When the most exalted form of hegemonic wartime masculinity is military
133 masculinity (...) and femininity is defined by domestic vulnerability, when the war
134 dead are construed as male and the mourners of the war dead as female, repre-
135 sentations of both genders are distorted: how to accommodate the civilian male, the
136 military male excluded from combat or women serving in uniform? (Peniston-Bird
137 & Ugolini, 2015, 3)

138 Following his traumatic experience as a civilian in Belgium, William, a former
139 pacifist, feels useless until his diminutive contribution to the war effort is accepted,
140 and even after that.

141 Before the war, dealing with a hostile reality, Hamilton had been deeply invested
142 in the belief that through effort and struggle the world would become a better place.

²www.inspirationalstories.com/poems/non-combatant/cicely-hamilton-poems Accessed 26.09.2015.

For other contemporary perspectives see Rose Macaulay's *Non-Combatants and Others*. Alix Sandomir, the protagonist, muses: 'Fighting war. I suppose really it's the only thing non-combatants can do with war, to make it hurt them less...as they can't go...' London: Methuen, 1986 (1916), 173.

See also May Sinclair, *A Journal of Impressions in Belgium* (1915, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1915. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/31332/31332-h/31332-h.htm> Accessed 07.03.2016.

³See Claire Buck, 'British Women's Writing of the Great War', 2005.

143 Her late-Victorian and early twentieth-century meliorism was brutally challenged
144 by the shock and trauma of war, her former confidence on uninterrupted civiliza-
145 tional ascent forced to confront its brittle foundations.⁴ The war powerfully dis-
146 rupted the former optimistic narrative of human liberation.

147 Looking through the chaos before her as if it were a scrim, Hamilton sees beyond it a future
148 in which the terror of a mature air power would, she imagined, turn town-dwelling citizens
149 into starving, barbarous nomads. (...) [Her] loss of the Enlightenment narrative appears to
150 happen, in part, because the terror of air power annihilates the continuity of past, present,
151 and future on which such a narrative depends. (Saint-Amour, 2015, Loc. 3607–3614)

152 Reflecting upon her own prolonged experience near the front, she realized that
153 human progress was not inevitable, re-evaluated some of her most authentic ideals,
154 and reappraised the human potential for self-destruction.

155 *William, an Englishman*, published in 1919, was an immediate enormous suc-
156 cess and received in 1920 the first *Femina* award.⁵ Long neglected and out of print,
157 the novel was in 1999 chosen to launch Persephone’s reading list.⁶ This chapter is a
158 modest contribution to read the novel and help redress what has been characterized
159 as ‘Hamilton’s erasure from history.’⁷

160 Often referred to as a suffrage novel, *William, an Englishman* should perhaps be
161 considered as a novel whose main characters, inexperienced young people engaged
162 before the war in the struggle for the vote, come to realize too late that the world is
163 more complex than their pre-war militancy had prepared them for. In 1935, the
164 author recalled the genesis of the book:

165 (...) my novel, (...), was taken by its public and critics for a war novel, but as a matter of
166 fact it was only accidentally that it dealt with the catastrophe of 1914. It was really a
167 ‘suffrage’ novel; its outline had taken shape in my thoughts before there was any suspicion
168 of the war to come, and its beginnings I date from a gathering where I heard certain

⁴Meliorism, The doctrine, intermediate between optimism and pessimism, which affirms that the world may be made better by rightly-directed human effort. James Sully (*Pessimism*, 1877) attributed the term to George Eliot, “the faith which affirms not merely our power of lessening evil - this nobody questions - but also our ability to increase the amount of positive good.” OED.

See also James Sully, *Pessimism: A History and A Criticism*, Henry S. King & Co., 1877, Chapter XIV, 399–401. <https://archive.org/details/pessimismahisto01sullgoog>. Accessed 26.01.2016.

⁵And first English prize-winner of the then most prominent prize to be awarded to any woman writer. See *Prix Femina*. <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/rd/a77f8754-6b14-448c-a06f-a491a43387f5>. Accessed 27.09.2015.

⁶Cicely Hamilton, *William, an Englishman*, London: Persephone Books, 1999 (1919). All references to the novel will be to this edition (first published in London by Skeffington & Son).

See also Urmilla Seshagiri, ‘Making It New: Persephone Books and the Modernist Project’, *Modern Fiction Studies* Volume 59, Number 2, Summer 2013, pp. 241–287, particularly 260–261.

⁷Margaret D. Stetz, Review of *The Life And Rebellious Times Of Cicely Hamilton: Actress, Writer, Suffragist*, by Lis Whitelaw, *Tulsa Women’s Studies in Women’s Literature*, Vol. 10, No. 2, (Autumn, 1991), 307.

Several of her works, including *Life Errant* and the 1940 *Lament for Democracy*, have long been out-of-print.

169 members of the militant section hold forth on the subject of their ‘war’. (...) I had no more
170 understanding than the average civilian of what warfare under modern conditions would
171 mean; but I did understand that it meant something more dangerous (...) than
172 rough-and-tumbles round the Houses of Parliament; (...) here was material for a story; a
173 young man and woman, enthusiastic, ignorant, who had thought of their little political
174 scuffle as war and who stumbled accidentally into the other kind of war – of bullets and
175 blood and high explosives. (Hamilton, 1935, 84–85)

176 The project was interrupted by the war and nearly forgotten until Hamilton
177 returned to it in ‘the form of a war novel’ (Hamilton, 1935, 85).

178 Interpreting the book within the context of the struggle between suffragists and
179 suffragettes, Claire Tylee goes a long way to persuade her readers that it is in fact
180 anti-suffrage.⁸ It is not. There is a wide difference between denouncing some
181 militants’ fanatical zeal and writing against the expansion of suffrage. However, the
182 author’s main concern throughout her life was the struggle for women’s rights not
183 suffrage per se.⁹

184 (...) if I worked for women’s enfranchisement (and I did work quite hard) it wasn’t because
185 I hoped great things from counting female noses at general elections, but because the
186 agitation for women’s enfranchisement must inevitably shake and weaken the tradition of
187 the ‘normal woman’. The ‘normal woman’ with her ‘destiny’ of marriage and motherhood
188 and housekeeping, and no interest outside her home – and especially no interest in the
189 man’s preserve of politics! My personal revolt was feminist rather than suffragist; (...).
190 (Hamilton, 1935, 65)

191 Cicely Hamilton lived to be eighty. She never renounced her feminist principles.
192 She most certainly did not value the right to vote as the ultimate panacea to all
193 problems and the 1st World War undeniably transformed some earlier illusions.

194 What use was the vote as a weapon against German guns, submarines and Gothas? The
195 problem of the moment was to keep ourselves alive, and when a people is engaged in a
196 life-and-death struggle, it is apt to lose interest in matters which yesterday were of sufficient
197 importance to raise it to a fury of dispute....I remember – how well I remember – receiving
198 official intimation that my name had been placed on the register of the Chelsea electorate! I
199 was in Abbeville at the time, and, as the post arrived, a battery of Archies, somewhere on
200 the hill, began to thud; an enemy aeroplane was over, taking photographs. I remember
201 thinking, as I read the notice, of all that the suffrage had meant for us, a year or two before!
202 How we had marched for the suffrage and held meetings and been shouted at; and how
203 friends of mine, filled with the spirit of the martyr, had hurled themselves at policemen –
204 and broken windows – and starved themselves in prison: and that now, at this moment of
205 achieved enfranchisement, what really interested me was not the thought of voting at the
206 next election, but the puffs of smoke that the Archies sent after the escaping plane. Truth to
207 tell, at that moment I didn’t care a button for my vote; and rightly or wrongly, I have always
208 imagined that the Government gave it me in much the same mood as I received it.
209 (Hamilton, 1935, 67–68)¹⁰

⁸See Tylee (1990, 133–141).

⁹See *Life Errant*, ‘Women on the Warpath’ *et passim*. See Whitelaw (1990). See also Noveck (2015).

¹⁰See also Whitelaw, particularly Chapter Ten, ‘Equality First’, 179–204.

210 *William, an Englishman* is also a war novel, though not exactly in the sense of
211 being written from the perspective of a soldier, or even a nurse or someone suffering
212 on the home front.¹¹ A truth-telling narrative of the war, it reveals the distance
213 between pre-war illusions and post-war disappointment. Such frustration is indis-
214 putably shared by both author and characters.

215 Prior to the conflict, Hamilton had been a well-known playwright, actress, stage
216 director, suffrage militant, polemical essayist and committed internationalist.¹² Her
217 by then published production included four full-length plays, two one acts, two
218 novels, *Marriage as a Trade* (1909), numerous articles, pamphlets, speeches. For
219 some time a member of the Women's Social and Political Union,¹³ she left dis-
220 satisfied with Mrs. Pankhurst's autocratic leadership and became a founder of the
221 Actresses' Franchise League and of the Women Writers Suffrage League.

222 Extremely active on the British radical scene, Hamilton's plays *Diana of*
223 *Dobsons* (1908), *How the Vote Was Won* (1909) or *A Pageant of Great Women*
224 (1910) obtained enormous success and helped, as they were meant to, attract
225 audiences to the suffragist cause.¹⁴

226 Her important feminist treatise, *Marriage as a Trade*, an immediately influential
227 book and a classic nowadays still in print, examines the condition of women,
228 arguing for education and training that would release them from having to rely on
229 the marriage market for self-respect and financial support. One brief example of the
230 essay's arguments reveals some of the issues later emphasized in Hamilton's
231 autobiography.

232 If it be granted that marriage is (...) essentially a trade on the part of woman – the exchange
233 of her person for the means of subsistence – it is legitimate to inquire into the manner in
234 which that trade is carried on, and to compare the position of the worker in the matrimonial
235 with the position of the worker in any other market. (...) the regulations governing com-
236 pulsory service – the institution of slavery and the like – are always framed, not in the
237 interests of the worker, but in the interests of those who impose his work upon him. The
238 regulations governing exchange and barter in the marriage market, therefore, are necessarily
239 framed in the interests of the employer – the male. (Hamilton, 1909, Loc. 330, p. 28)¹⁵

¹¹If we ignore the devastation wreaked by war on women, children, civilians, animals, the land, buildings, bridges, communications, the entire fabric of family, social and civilized life, we can perhaps construe the makers of war to be its victims, but this requires that we imagine the world of war to be inhabited only by soldiers (...).’ Hanley, 1991, 31.

Hanley was one of the first scholars to challenge Paul Fussell's selective myth of war literature in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 1975.

¹²See *Life Errant* and Whitelaw's biography.

¹³She wrote the lyrics of Ethel Smyth's 1910 “The March of the Women” for the Women's Social and Political Union.

¹⁴*How the Vote Was Won: A Play in One Act* initially a story by Hamilton later dramatized with Christopher St John (alias Christabel Marshall).

¹⁵*Marriage as A Trade*'s denunciation of marriage as the first degrading means of women earning a living preceded another reputed critique of patriarchy, Olive Schreiner's *Woman and Labour* (1911).

240 In August 1914 Hamilton promptly decided to contribute to the war effort.¹⁶ She
241 volunteered for one of the Scottish Women's Hospitals being prepared by Elsie
242 Inglis. When the British War office turned down the offer of a hospital unit of one
243 hundred beds entirely staffed by women, Dr Inglis offered her services to the French
244 and the Serbian authorities; both readily accepted. From the end of November 1914
245 until May 1917, Hamilton was working for the Allies, in the Scottish Women's
246 Hospital at the Abbey of Royaumont.¹⁷ Twenty five miles behind the trenches, she
247 closely witnessed the suffering of both troops and civilians. She was involved in
248 translation, letter writing, book-keeping, administration, nursing the wounded from
249 the Battle of the Somme, organising concerts and plays for the soldiers. In the
250 spring of 1917 she moved to Abbeville¹⁸ to produce "Concerts at the Front" until
251 near the end of the war, returning in early 1919 to entertain the remaining troops.

252 In Abbeville Hamilton suffered a decisive shock:

253 (...) that night, as plane after plane came over from the east (...) above and beyond my
254 personal fear was fear and horror of the future. For on that night there was born an idea
255 which (...) I have never been able to get rid of; the idea (...) that if Science destroy our
256 civilization, it will not be for the first time. (...) it was on the hill above Abbeville that the
257 thought, in a flash, made havoc of my old beliefs in progress, and the onward march of
258 humanity; I never knew till then how strong was my belief in progress, how completely I
259 had taken the onward march for granted. (Hamilton, 1935, 149–151)¹⁹

260 Probably written in a tent near the French front in early 1918 and finished while
261 on leave in England later that summer, *William, an Englishman* is a remarkably
262 understated narrative of a young English couple, William Tully and Griselda
263 Watkins, surprised in the Belgian countryside by the German invasion.²⁰

264 The novel, told by a first-person omniscient narrator who sometimes goes into
265 the protagonist's mind, relates the couple's appalling apprenticeship of moral and
266 physical humiliation. While moved by genuine sympathy for her characters,
267 Hamilton's text builds up on the narrator's (and the reader's) initial feeling of gentle

¹⁶Hamilton's reaction to the news of war was widely shared by most suffrage activists. Sylvia Pankhurst was of course the most famous exception to such widespread support.

¹⁷'The progress and achievements of the hospital were followed with great interest by many of the leading women doctors (...) the reputation of women in the medical profession depended in part on their performance in difficult wartime conditions.' Crofton, 2013, Loc. 1177.

Hamilton has been considered a key figure in the whole enterprise.

¹⁸A major railway junction and important army base camp on the river Somme. See also Bowen (2010).

¹⁹The 'flash' originated her dystopian *Theodore Savage*. See note 1. See also Whitelaw, 173–178.

Saint-Amour characterizes *Theodore Savage* as: 'a speculative fiction whose description of a future air war followed by societal collapse realizes Hamilton's premonitions and epiphanies under the German bombs at Abbeville.' Loc. 3651.

The trauma of the bombardment touched 'her faith in a habitable future, her political agency, her investment in her life'. Ibidem, Loc. 3627.

²⁰'In February 1919, when *William—an Englishman* was first published, its forty-seven year old author was still in France, where she had been since the outbreak of the war (...)' Beauman, *Preface to William, an Englishman*, v.

268 superiority towards them. On 21 June 1919, the anonymous reviewer for *The*
269 *Spectator* wrote, ‘the author at intervals relentlessly reminding the reader of the
270 dates - May, June, and July, 1914. With the passing of every month the reader feels
271 the tragedy of the World War drawing nearer and nearer.’²¹

272 The novel’s depiction of the fight for feminine suffrage draws on Hamilton’s
273 familiarity with the movement up to 1914.

274 [William and Griselda] had lived for so long less as individuals than as members of
275 organisations (...). They believed that Society could be straightened and set right by the
276 well-meaning efforts of well-meaning souls like themselves – aided by the Ballot, the Voice
277 of the People, and Woman. They believed, in defiance of the teachings of history, that
278 Democracy is another word for peace and goodwill towards men. They believed (quite
279 rightly) in the purity of their own intentions; and concluded (quite wrongly) that the
280 intentions of all persons who did not agree with them must therefore be evil and impure....
281 They were, in short, very honest and devout sectarians (...). (Hamilton, 1919, 19–20)

282 In the portrayal of two emotionally and politically immature characters, the
283 writer deplores the dogmatism of some of her militant companions, their
284 unawareness of the international situation, their smug certainties. ‘Neither [in 1919]
285 nor later could Hamilton abide the cruelty of herd mentality and the
286 holier-than-thou dogmatism of organizational members – whatever the organiza-
287 tion.’ (Blodgett, 1990, 101).

288 However authentic in the devotion to their causes they may be, in the first two
289 chapters everything about William and Griselda is diminutive.

290 Griselda Watkins, then a little under twenty-five, was [William’s] exact counterpart in
291 petticoats; a piece of blank-minded, suburban young-womanhood caught in the militant
292 suffrage movement and enjoying herself therein. (...) Like William, she had no quarrel with
293 continental nations; (...) her combatant instincts were concentrated on antagonists nearer
294 home; (...) their little vision was as narrow as it was pure (...). (Hamilton, 1919, 16, 21, 22)

295 Their self-righteousness as the war draws near, ‘the profound ignorance of the
296 unread and unimaginative’ (Hamilton, 1919, 29), contrasts with the reader’s
297 awareness that such bliss cannot possibly last.

298 Neither William nor Griselda had ever entertained the idea of a European War; it was not
299 entertained by any of their friends or their pamphlets. Rumours of war they had always
300 regarded as foolish and malicious inventions set afloat in the interests of Capitalism and
301 Conservatism with the object of diverting attention from Social Reform or the settlement of
302 the Woman Question; (...) their historical ignorance was so profound, they had talked so
303 long and so often in terms of war, that they had come to look on the strife of nations as a
304 glorified scuffle on the lines of a Pankhurst demonstration. (Hamilton, 1919, 74)

305 The reader’s apprehension strengthens with the couple’s choice for their three
306 weeks’ honeymoon at the end of July 1914 of an isolated idyllic ‘cottage in the
307 heart of the Belgian Ardennes’. (Hamilton, 1919, 31) In that secluded location no

²¹Spectator Archive, William—an Englishman. By Cicely Hamilton. 21 June 1919, Page 20.
<http://archive.spectator.co.uk/article/21st-june-1919/20/william-an-englishman-by-cicely-hamilton-skeffington>. Accessed 08.03.2016.



308 news from the outside world is obtainable. Neither of them is able to read, speak or
309 understand French. Had they been more aware or better informed instead of
310 deliberately ‘shutting out sight and sound of the country peace, the oppressive
311 peace in which they had no part’; (Hamilton, 1919, 45) they might have understood
312 the ominous meaning of what they imagine is the sound of thunder. The narrator
313 begins to favour a gentler tone.

314 If they had but known it, they were the last tourists of their race who for many and many a
315 day to come were to look on the scene before them. Had they but known it, they would
316 certainly have scanned it more keenly; as it was, they surveyed the wide landscape con-
317 tentedly but with no particular enthusiasm. (Hamilton, 1919, 48)

318 They then misconstrue the sound of guns in the distance as military manoeuvres.
319 Bored by ‘the oppressive peace’ of the countryside, lacking everyday militancy,
320 they decide to leave for England. By then it is of course too late. The war they were
321 too ignorant to expect is harshly upon them. Beaten, assaulted and taken prisoners
322 by the Germans, William and Griselda obey the soldiers, ‘in the clutch of brute
323 force (...) they trotted down the valley, humiliated, dishevelled, indignant, but still
324 incredulous - while their world crumbled about them and Europe thundered and
325 bled’ (Hamilton, 1919, 75, 77).

326 The narrator now closely follows William’s memories of his ‘first acquaintance
327 with the war as the soldier understands it’ (Hamilton, 1919, 78), accompanying the
328 couple’s apprenticeship of suffering. Initial incredulity and shock soon give way to
329 the revelation of hitherto inconceivable dimensions of brutality. The whole mood of
330 the text is transformed to convey the pity and horror of war. And the reader’s
331 appalled awareness of this new reality follows William’s transformation. Behind
332 lies the ‘gentle satire’ first used to introduce the couple and acknowledged in
333 Beauman’s *Preface* (Beauman, 1999, ix).

334 With this novel Hamilton was taking leave of her own pre-war illusions.

335 (...) in depicting William’s struggle to come to terms with the inadequacy of pacifism as a
336 response to tyranny and his reluctant acceptance that there are campaigns more compelling
337 than the fight for women’s suffrage [Hamilton] offers some insights into the concerns which
338 preoccupied her at this time (...). (Whitelaw, 1990, 164)

339 The reader shares William’s distress as increasingly bleaker incidents follow one
340 another.

341 For the first time mortal fear had seized him by the throat and shaken him. He knew now
342 that he stood before death itself, and the power to inflict death (...). [t]he spasm of terror in
343 those first moments of comprehension had been stronger than the spasm of pity (...). Long
344 beating seconds (three or four of them at most) while two men stood upright with bandaged
345 eyes and rifles pointed at their hearts; (...) The man with the grizzled hair threw out an arm
346 and toppled with his face in the dust; the mayor slid sideways against the wall with the
347 blood dribbling from his mouth. (Hamilton, 1919, 86–88)

348 Leaving behind well-meaning fantasies of internationalism, the ruthless execu-
349 tion of the village mayor constitutes William’s initiatory rite of passage, his first
350 epiphany of war and suffering, demoralizing any innocent pacifist ideals,

351 to his pity and physical nausea was added the impotent, gasping confusion of the man
352 whose faith has been uprooted, who is face to face with the incredible (...). War was: men
353 were shot against walls. (Hamilton, 1919, 89–90)

354 The episode was based on Hamilton's knowledge of the barbarous treatment of
355 Senlis, pitilessly occupied for a week, methodically burned, one street after another,
356 and of the Germans' summary execution of its mayor.²² Summing up Hamilton's
357 1917 account, Whitelaw relates the fate of the town:

358 When the Germans marched into [Senlis], believing they had driven out the French sol-
359 diers, they were surprised to encounter pockets of resistance. (...) Wherever they
360 encountered enemy fire they sent groups of French civilians taken at random from among
361 the population ahead of them as they advanced towards the French guns. In some cases the
362 French soldiers realised in time what was happening and held their fire but in others the
363 civilians were shot by their fellow countrymen. (Whitelaw, 1990, 149)

364 The biographer emphasizes how such behaviour showed the author 'the totality
365 of modern warfare; warfare in which soldiers could cold-bloodedly use civilians,
366 including women and children, as stalking-horses; warfare in which there were no
367 longer any rules.' (Whitelaw, 1990, 149).

368 The novel's pace is now intimately woven with the young man's responsiveness
369 to what is happening around him. In the chaos of war the only order available is the
370 chronology of event after event.

371 [T]he collision between William and Griselda's pastoral honeymoon and the brutalizing
372 forces of the German army precipitates modernity's signature crisis: a rupturing of smooth
373 historical time that defamiliarizes the present and reorders the past. (Seshagiri, 2013, 264)

374 The text's writing style now replicates William's suffering. Intense powerful
375 images replace the understated prose of the first six chapters. Exhausted by forced
376 labour, 'stupefied by pain and weariness' (Hamilton, 1919, 104), he witnesses a
377 battle, is nearly caught by shellfire, helps a dying German boy-soldier.

378 It was twisted now into a grin of agony, but all the same he recognized the face of the
379 German boy-soldier who had dealt kindly with him that afternoon (...) lying on his back
380 and covered from the middle downwards with a litter of broken beam and ironwork (...).
381 The effect of recognition on William was curiously and instantly sobering; he was no longer
382 alone in the hell where the ground reeled and men ran from him; he was no longer an
383 animal wild and unreasoning, but a man with a definite human relationship to the boy lying
384 broken at his feet. (Hamilton, 1919, 105–106)

385 The strange meeting and the horror of the whole situation are instrumental to
386 William's transformation. Learning what real suffering may be, the impact of
387 physical and psychological distress will change a little somewhat foolish (every)-
388 man into someone determined to fight the barbarity he experiences, 'the guns for
389 the moment were a private persecution of himself, and he was conscious only of
390 being foully and brutally bullied by monstrous forces with whom he argued and at
391 whom he cursed and spat.' (Hamilton, 1919, 107).

²²See *Senlis*, 38–39, 41, 45–46.

392 The temporary disorder of his captors enables William to look for his wife in the
393 deserted village. He finds her. In an empty little house Griselda is alone, ‘(...)
394 crouched in a corner with her head on her knees, she neither saw nor heard him.
395 (...) her face (...) white and tear-marked, with swollen lips and red eyes’ (Hamilton,
396 1919, 113–114).

397 This is William’s second and crucial epiphany. Griselda has been assaulted and
398 abused.

399 For a moment he fought with the certainty, and then it came down on him like a storm: for
400 once in his life his imagination was vivid, (...). All the details, the animal details, her cries
401 and her pitiful wrestlings; the phrase ‘licentious soldiering’ personified in the face of the
402 man who had been Griselda’s gaoler. (Hamilton, 1919, 115)

403 In the debris of these two common diminutive lives the reader discovers a
404 metonymy for the predicament of millions of ordinary persons trapped in war.
405 ‘Cicely’s abhorrence of what she had seen during her time in France is channelled
406 into her compassionate account of human suffering.’ (Whitelaw, 1990, 162). The
407 devastation she witnessed reverberates on the whole optimistic ethos.

408 The effect of the rape on Griselda’s mind signifies the larger effect of the war on the
409 discourse of suffrage and social reform; what had been whole and meaningful now shatters
410 into a [sic] Eliotic heap of broken images. (Seshagiri, 2013, 265)

411 The protagonist understands that his own private agony is yet another materi-
412 alization of the public catastrophe. The texture of people’s lives in the everyday
413 reality of war forces him to face up to the calamitous scale of the tragedy. Fleeing
414 south with some Belgian refugees, his broken Griselda soon dies and is buried
415 ‘wrapped in a sheet’. (Hamilton, 1919, 145) William, compassionately helped,
416 escapes to Paris and, ‘seeing himself rather as an avenger of Griselda than as a
417 soldier of the British Empire’ (Hamilton, 1919, 162), learns to recognize his need
418 for revenge. The former pacifist has become pro-war.

419 What he lacked in patriotism he made up in personal suffering; he hated the German
420 because he had been robbed of his wife, (...). It was his persistent poring over English
421 newspapers that brought him in the end the salvation of a definite purpose. (Hamilton,
422 1919, 160)²³

423 William’s earlier militant certainties collapse, ‘his new creed had at least this
424 merit—it was supported by his own experience.’ (Hamilton, 1919, 162–163)

425 Back in London, he tries to enlist but is rejected because of his frail physique.
426 Hamilton’s 1917 poem comes to mind.²⁴

²³See also ‘It was because of the horror inspired by [German sins] that they counted in a military sense. They stirred the loathing even of the unimaginative; they disposed once for all of the pacifist argument, “What if the Germans did come; we should not be any worse off”. They made it impossible to suffer the victory of a nation that countenanced such sins.’ (Senlis, 1917, 37).

²⁴See this chapter pages 3–4.

427 Humiliated by enforced passivity, estranged from former acquaintances, he
428 confronts them with his traumatic experience. The companions of a more innocent
429 time are forced to hear a plain-spoken testimony.

430 'You stand there and dare to make jokes about the hell that other men have burned in. The
431 flames and the blood and the guns and people dying in the road. (...). Not one of you here
432 has seen what I have – you're just guessing. When a shell bursts...I've seen a man with his
433 legs like red jelly and a horse...' (...) Of course it shouldn't happen – we all know that – of
434 course it shouldn't happen, but it does. And you can't stop it with sneers about soldiers and
435 Kitchener....It's hell and the mouth of hell – I've seen it.' (Hamilton, 1919, 182–183)

436 Hamilton voices through William Tully her strong critical attitude towards those
437 who insisted on ignoring the reality of war. Defending participation in the war effort
438 as politically judicious and morally imperative, she wants to contribute to the
439 collapse of distinctions between combatants and non-combatants.

440 William's 'sense of the impossibility of his previous classification of mankind
441 into the well-intentioned and the evil' (Hamilton, 1919, 190–191) expresses
442 Hamilton's own distance from her pre-war militancy. 'The war led Hamilton to
443 believe firmly in the aggression of human nature.' (Frayn, 2014, 87) Her critique of
444 social reformers, internationalist, pacifist and suffragist societies is an indictment of
445 their and some of her own earlier convictions. First and foremost it is a wakeup call
446 to those on the Home front. The Great War made a mockery of former certainties.
447 Its viciousness forbade sentimentality and utopian delusions.

448 After having tried to enlist yet a third time, William Tully had surprisingly
449 passed a medical inspection. Accepted in the army he collapsed after some weeks of
450 drill. When 'out of the hospital (...) he was put on clerical duties. (...) handled a
451 typewriter instead of a bayonet, and handled it steadily as the months lengthened
452 into years.' (Hamilton, 1919, 198) This protagonist was never meant to be a hero. In
453 her main character Hamilton put to good use her extensive knowledge of the
454 administrative aspects of war. She was familiarized with the drudgery of wartime
455 bureaucracy, its octopus like paper trail, the allegedly feminine qualities needed to
456 endure it. Such activities further reinforce William's frustration.

457 His conception of soldiering, derived as it was from his own brief and fiery experience in
458 Belgium, from the descriptive articles of war correspondents and his reading of bygone
459 campaigns, had never included the soldier who was merely a clerk. (Hamilton, 1919, 198)

460 In August 1916 William is sent to France on clerical duties, 'a life of bleak order
461 and meticulous, safe regularity, poles apart from his civilian forecast of the doings
462 of a man of war.' (Hamilton, 1919, 204) The character suffers from his irrelevance.

463 William's pre-war beliefs and experience of the war mean that he is fuelled by bitterness.
464 Even when the physical requirements have been lowered far enough for the diminutive
465 William to enlist, he finds himself unsuited to commit violence and forced to revert to
466 administration. (...) He still seeks individual action and agency, and refuses the notion of
467 contributing to the war effort as significant. (...) Hamilton's novel demonstrates clearly the
468 difficulties of reconciling pre-war enchantments with the realities of post-war Britain.
469 (Frayn, 2014, 88–89)

470 As common and insignificant as ever, an air-raid will release him.

471 Once it had seemed to him an easy thing to follow Griselda and die; now all the moral
472 strength he possessed went into the effort not to shrink, to be master of his body, to behave
473 decently and endure. That was all that seemed to matter – to be steady and behave decently
474 – so that, for all his fear of instant death, he never turned his thoughts to God.... (Hamilton,
475 1919, 221–222)

476 One of the victims of the bombardment, he dies a quiet dignified death. His life
477 had long lost all meaning and purpose. *William, an Englishman*, had felt a nobody
478 not everyman. He could not imagine a future and revenge was not the answer.

479 *William, an Englishman* charts the young man's progress from initial naïve
480 pacifism to trauma, recognition of bellicose patriotism and shattered final disap-
481 pointment. In his all but anonymous life and death, William Tully represents
482 millions of men (and women) whose lives were destroyed by the Great War.

483 Hamilton's title character emerges as an overlooked exemplar of the damaged, ineffectual
484 English masculinity that constitutes the subject of so much War-era modernism. Ford
485 Madox Ford's Edward Ashburnham in *The Good Soldier*, D. H. Lawrence's Egbert in
486 'England, my England', Woolf's Jacob Flanders in *Jacob's Room*: William Tully shares
487 with these *frères et semblables* a diminishing capacity for self-actualization, an unspec-
488 tacular death, and a bleak legacy (...). (Seshagiri, 2013, 266)

489 In *A Very Great Profession: The Woman's Novel 1914–39*, Beauman empha-
490 sizes in Hamilton's text 'the grandeur of the ordinary' (Beauman, 1983, 31) that
491 will become identifiable in later novels about the war.

492 (...) everyone matters in his own way, (...) integrity is the important quality and (...) the
493 little (...) clerk has his grandeur as much as the swashbuckling soldier. [It] shows the effect
494 of the enormous, uncontrollable might of war upon the lives of the petty, the unimportant
495 and the ordinary. (Beauman, 1983, 31)

496 The main character and the whole novel signal the rupture between the pre-war
497 meliorism that Cicely Hamilton had firmly professed and a new disenchanted
498 awareness. Torn between the unequivocal need for social and political change and
499 her experience of the physical and moral devastation of war, the scepticism that any
500 radical transformation may indeed be achieved compels Hamilton to alert the
501 reader. The text's denunciation of social progress, pacifism, internationalism as
502 naive ideals may appear unexpected. '*William - An Englishman* demonstrates how
503 the vast scale of modern international warfare devastates even the most morally
504 unquestionable revolutionary discourse.' (Seshagiri, 2013, 267).

505 Hamilton drew from personal knowledge and contemporary documents to write
506 a novel that, while unquestionably touched by sympathy for her characters, is
507 highly critical of their pre-war beliefs and activities. The text condemns the brutal
508 futility of war and the vulnerability of civilian populations exposed to its ravages.
509 William's words could be her own.

510 He hated the war as it affected himself, was weary of the war in general; all he
511 longed for was its ending, (...) but neither hatred nor weariness had blinded his eyes
512 to the folly of that other blindness which had denied that war could be (Hamilton,
513 1919, 216).



514 The collapse of Hamilton's previous political optimism, her (self-ironical) criticism
515 of any belief in the perfectibility of human beings may come as a shock even
516 today. But, as was apparent at the beginning of this chapter, those familiar with her
517 1917 homage to Senlis might have anticipated Hamilton's sombre 1919 novel and
518 the death she chose for William. The unprecedented power of aerial warfare, its
519 ominous capacity to magnify the worst of once dreaded war experiences, the
520 likelihood of further indiscriminate air strikes against both combatants and civilian
521 populations, were 'in a flash' recognized by Hamilton as introducing a new (near)
522 apocalyptic era. The bombardment of English coastal towns very early in the
523 conflict had been a dismal warning.

524 Not only did Cicely Hamilton survive air-raids in France, she understood early
525 on the brutal impact of the war from the air, the helplessness of cities, the persistent
526 menace to both civilians and the military of this then recent weapon.

527 The 'unfit' who step into the shoes of the fit, the old men who fill the gaps left by their sons,
528 the women who press into fields and workshops — all these keep the fighting line going,
529 and without them the fighting line must fail; and hence, under modern conditions of war, an
530 increasing difficulty in drawing the line that protects the civilian from open attack by the
531 soldier. A munition factory staffed by women, a laboratory where some weakling discovers
532 a chemical compound, may be deadlier instruments of death and destruction than thousands
533 of horses and men. Further, where each party to the strife enlists the services of his entire
534 population (...) the question of national exhaustion looms far larger than it did in the day of
535 the professional soldier and the army running to thousands. (Hamilton, 1917a, b, 35–36)

536 This was total war. The distinction between non-combatants and soldiers had
537 lost its former meaning. Everybody became involved. Everybody became a target.
538 Hamilton observed the dislocation of former hopes and heralded the fracture of
539 long-cherished beliefs.

540 The work and resources of a civilian population have always been an indirect factor in
541 every military situation; but to-day they are a factor direct and declared, to-day the exempt
542 and the women are openly mobilized and enlisted. One sees that this direct intervention of
543 the civilian in warfare must entail a certain loss of his immunity from direct attack and
544 punishment, and that a leader hard pressed or unscrupulous may deem himself entitled to
545 interpret the fundamental maxim enjoining him to cut his enemy's communications in a
546 fashion undreamed by those who framed rules for a conflict confined to the soldier. (...)
547 The German leaders decided at the outset that their war was a war on non-combatants.
548 (Hamilton, 1917a, 35–36)

549 However, Cicely Hamilton never gave up on her fight for a better world. In
550 *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopaedic Form*, Saint-Amour reminds
551 us, that 'like [Virginia] Woolf, Hamilton saw the future's apparent foreclosure as
552 reason not for quietism but for intensified dissent.' (Saint-Amour, 2015, Loc. 3119)
553 After the war she was involved in encouraging international women's suffrage,
554 beginning the decade as press secretary for the Geneva Conference (1920) of the
555 International Woman Suffrage Alliance. Throughout the 1920s she was lobbying
556 for free birth control and abortion law reform. She continued to write and contributed
557 regularly to *Time and Tide*, the first declaredly feminist newspaper,
558 'owned, managed and written entirely by women' (Whitelaw, 1990, 184). Hamilton



559 never renounced her conviction that women's independence and equality of the
560 sexes would ultimately ensure a better world for both women and men.²⁵ In the
561 early 1930s she endorsed the organisation of the *Dignity in Dying*. In 1940 *Lament*
562 *for Democracy* denounced Nazism, Fascism and Bolshevism. A member of the
563 Chelsea Fire Service during the Second World War, Hamilton in the 1930s and
564 1940s also published ten travelogues of her journeys to divers European countries.
565 In her final years, from 1945 to 1952, she was editor of the press bulletin of the
566 British League for European Freedom. 'Hamilton did remain, movingly, awake and
567 at work.' (Saint-Amour, 2015, Loc. 3645).

568 Cicely Hamilton's first-hand experience of the war, expressed in *William, an*
569 *Englishman*, helped bridge the gap between civilians at home and those who had
570 been in or near the front. Lessening the distance between them, the novel addresses
571 and challenges what was too often and for too long a divided culture.

572 A sad, somewhat nostalgic adieu to the illusions she had cherished before the
573 Great War, this novel is also a sad powerful warning of times to come. But the
574 resilience she had witnessed in France might well have been the motto of her life, 'a
575 joy and an encouragement, a reminder that life was lived peaceably once and may
576 be lived peaceably again.' (Hamilton, 1918, 579).

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