



The Road to the Aide Post
Stapledon, William Olaf

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About Stapledon:

He was born in Seacombe, Wallasey, on the Wirral peninsula near Liverpool, the only son of William Clibbert Stapledon and Emmeline Miller. The first six years of his life were spent with his parents at Port Said. He was educated at Abbotsholme School and Balliol College, Oxford, where he acquired a BA in Modern History in 1909 and a Master's degree in 1913[citation needed]. After a brief stint as a teacher at Manchester Grammar School, he worked in shipping offices in Liverpool and Port Said from 1910 to 1913. During World War I he served with the Friends' Ambulance Unit in France and Belgium from July 1915 to January 1919. On 16 July 1919 he married Agnes Zena Miller (1894-1984), an Australian cousin whom he had first met in 1903, and who maintained a correspondence with him throughout the war from her home in Sydney. They had a daughter, Mary Sydney Stapledon (1920-), and a son, John David Stapledon (1923-). In 1920 they moved to West Kirby, and in 1925 Stapledon was awarded a PhD in philosophy from the University of Liverpool. He wrote *A Modern Theory of Ethics*, which was published in 1929. However he soon turned to fiction to present his ideas to a wider public. *Last and First Men* was very successful and prompted him to become a full-time writer. He wrote a sequel, and followed it up with many more books on subjects associated with what is now called Transhumanism. In 1940 the family built and moved into Simon's Field, in Caldy. After 1945 Stapledon travelled widely on lecture tours, visiting the Netherlands, Sweden and France, and in 1948 he spoke at the Congress of Intellectuals for Peace in Wroclaw, Poland. He attended the Conference for World Peace held in New York in 1949, the only Briton to be granted a visa to do so. In 1950 he became involved with the anti-apartheid movement; after a week of lectures in Paris, he cancelled a projected trip to Yugoslavia and returned to his home in Caldy, where he died very suddenly of a heart attack. Olaf Stapledon was cremated at Landican Crematorium; his widow Agnes and their children Mary and John scattered his ashes on the sandy cliffs overlooking the Dee Estuary, a favourite spot of Olaf's, and a location that features in more than one of his books. Source: Wikipedia

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In Belgium at two o'clock in the morning, an ambulance driver stepped out of his car and yawned. It had rained since the previous night and the world was very wet. But at last the west wind was victoriously pursuing the clouds, piling their disordered companies one upon another. Suddenly the moon shone. White ruined houses on one side of the street, huddled like sheep, looked towards the East and the star shells. Dark ruined houses on the other side held their broken walls and rafters against the sky. The driver stood for a moment watching: he began a sigh, but successfully turned it into a yawn, and moved away to prepare his car for two stretcher cases. Then he walked into the place that was once a children's playground, toward the Aide post, once the school cellar. How slow they were to-night in bringing out the school cellar. How slow they were to-night in bringing out the wounded? He examined a new hole where a shell had gone through the building. He stood by a heap of debris and watched the moon. A mighty white upright cloud was flying overhead. He looked up the sides of it as if he were standing at the foot of some extravagant aerial leaning tower of Pisa, for ever falling upon him through a sky visibly deep as the universe. The moon looked at him in that significant way of hers, as if she were desperately trying to tell him some good news. For a moment he stood fascinated by this sudden beauty. Then he remembered himself, and carefully yawned in the face of the moon.

They brought out the wounded; one moaning, the other silent; the one face half hidden under rugs and miserably moving; the other face wholly hidden under white bandages. The stretchers were soon stowed on board, driver and brancardier took their seats, and the old bus crept down the street.

The moaning man moaned with regularity, save when the car bumped him into a cry. The other lay still. What an embusqué slacker I am! thought the driver What must these old fellows think of me? The moaning man was a vieux papa for whom war was an incongruous, last chapter to a life of tilling and begetting. It was incongruous, but he had not complained. Gallantry was not his line, but he had not shirked anything that he was expected to do. Now he lay absorbed in his pain, praying for the end of the journey, or losing himself among grotesque visions of crops and beast and bursting shells, only to find himself once more in a furnace of pain. The other lay still; no one can guess where his spirit wandered, upon the earth or in the hollow sky. It's a miserable game, thought the driver, Why didn't I enlist long ago? He had no peace principles, and he disliked people, who said they were pacifists. War might

be a horrible mistake, but his soldier friends in Gallipoli and Flanders were dying well. They had excelled themselves. Better make a hideous mistake and suffer with one's fellows than be a lone prig. For him, war was not scientific hate; it was love gone mad. England demanded him, and England was a nearer thing than God. Besides, who said it was wrong to fight? The best things were won by fighting; and God fought Satan. What a Paradise Lost if God had been a pacifist!

So thought the driver, as he drove down moonlit avenues. At the hospital, the car was unloaded, and he saw the two broken men carried through the door that had received so many like them.

Now in the early dawn that driver came hurrying back. There was a rose pink glow in the East, as if no ill had ever come out of that quarter; as if hate were never in this world. Into this fairy land he drove, and the joy of morning began in him. But the gentle appearance of things did not shake his resolution. Surely, surely, he must enlist, and give his life with his friends. The Red Cross was not a heavy enough cross for such as he. The sunrise swallowed aid that was left of the night; the whole sky was on fire. He would go, he would go. What was he that he should judge, when so many finer men had not hesitated to fight? His Quaker parents would be very grieved, but he must do it. He himself was unhappy thinking of his parents' grief. After all war was indeed a hideous thing. In fact his determination to fight began already his disillusionment. A secret voice saying You will fight only because you are ashamed not to fight. You will fight for you own peace of mind, not for victory, not for the cause. You have not forgotten yourself in the cause. You will not even find the peace of mind you seek. The sun flashed from behind the Eastern cloudbank and the trees and fields and sparkling canal seemed suddenly to laugh, so bright they grew. Oh God, what a world! cried the driver aloud while the car roared along. The sun and the countryside undoubtedly confirmed that secret voice now that he allowed himself to attend to them.

He had heard someone say that just as private killing went out of date so will war someday go also, and that this War is but the red dawn of a new age wherein many obscurities will be enlightened. Surely if Peace and Goodwill could not be the idea of to-day they would be the idea of to-morrow. Woe unto those who, having any inkling of that great idea of to-morrow, desert it even for the highest of to-day's ideals. The Fates had made him to have some glimpse of the dawn, before his fighting friends: Woe to him if he closed his eyes.

Not happy, nor content, nor even positive, was he on his return; but very sure that he would not fight. His vision of the new idea (which is also so old an idea) was very faint; but it was a vision, and commanded his allegiance. Perhaps after all he was making a mistake; but it was a noble mistake. The vision must be followed even at the risk of his soul's life.

The driver backed his car into its place; stumped into the camp, pulled his best enemy out of bed, persuaded the puppy to lick the cook's slumbering face; and began his morning toilet. Many times again he was tempted in that wilderness of doubt. Each time the vision was a little clearer than before.

He is a type, is he not?

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