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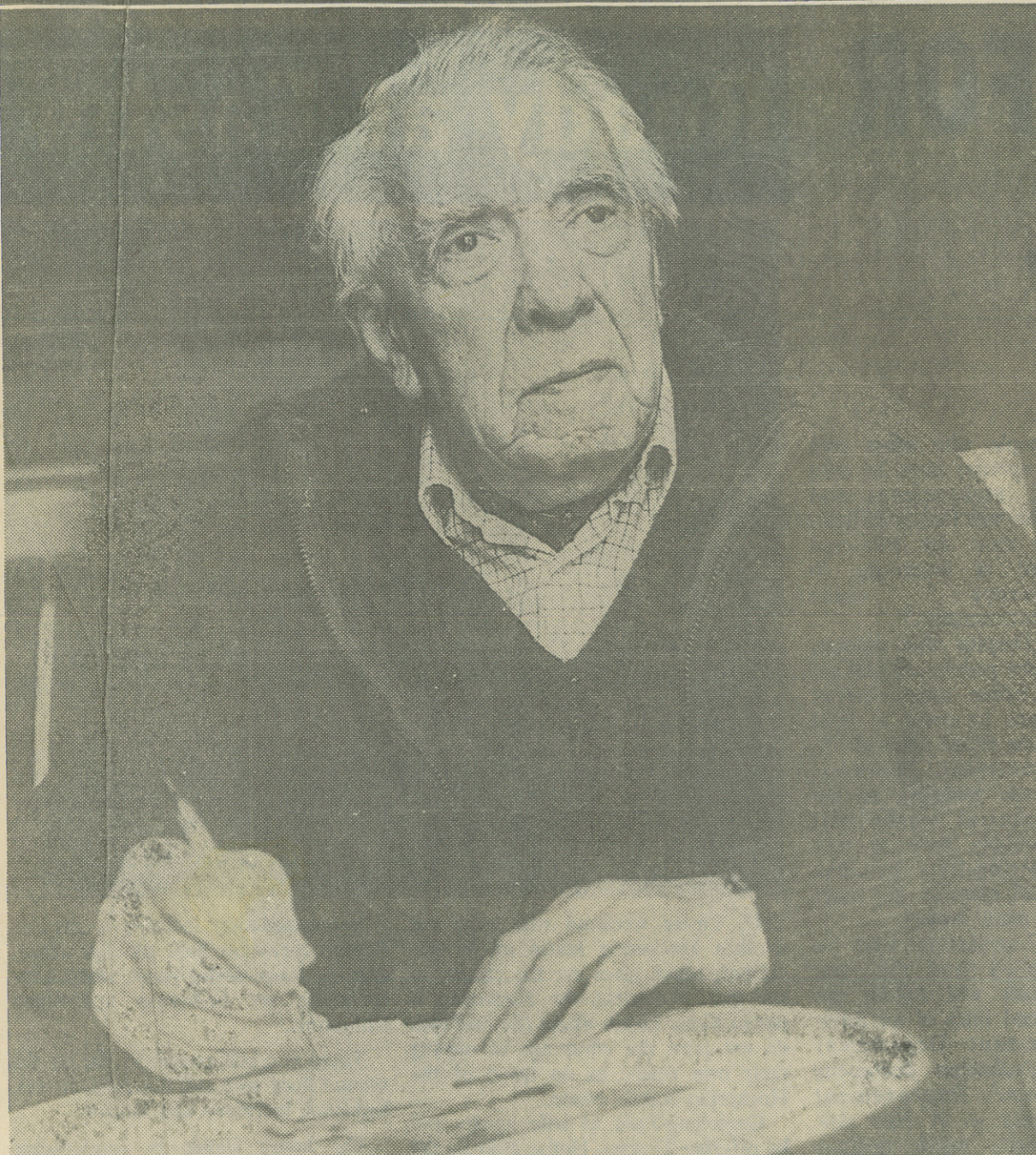
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Dr. Burton at 90 working on the nature column he writes for the Daily Telegraph every week.  
Photo: Paul Sherwood.

## A long life's journey from no-man's-land to a Promised Land

James Hamilton

PROFILE || Maurice Burton



Maurice Burton as a young soldier in May 1916.

"COME back you bloody fool!" someone shouted from the dugout as a young gunner dashed out to fire at a German plane flying overhead.

As the soldier turned to heed the Command, there was a loud explosion as an artillery shell burst, and where he had stood was his greatcoat — cut to ribbons.

The young soldier had been flung into the dugout by the force of the explosion, but miraculously escaped death.

The young gunner was Maurice Burton, the naturalist and writer, who celebrated his 90th birthday at his home at Albury on Monday.

Born in Hornsey, London, he was one of six children of a railway guard at King's Cross station.

In 1916, at the age of 18, Burton joined up fight in the Great War as a gunner.

Today, Dr. Burton does not brag about his war record although he took part in the bloody battles of the Somme,

Passchendaele and the 1918 retreat.

The war, he says, had little effect on him. "I have often thought how little I worried about the war. If a missile landed close you were worried, but it soon passed."

"After seeing bodies crushed by tanks, you get hardened to it."

By becoming a signaller, he joined what was known as the "suicide club" because signallers' spells of duties often took them to Front Line observation posts and even into no-man's-land.

Of the 126 men in his battery of the Royal Artillery he was one of only six of the soldiers left serving in the regiment at the end of the war.

And still, on every Remembrance Day, Dr. Burton can be found keenly watching the parades on television and recalling the many friends he lost during the war.

"I visualise them dead on the field and I get very upset. I especially mourn my best friend, Sgt. Arthur Parsons, who died trying to rescue an injured pal in no-man's-land.

"He was just one of many men of considerable talent who were used as cannon fodder."

With the signing of the armistice on November 11, 1918, silence fell in the battle zone. Then, soon after, singing could be heard in the distance. Gradually emerging from the mist came British troops returning from the front, singing as they came.

"It was a never-to-be-forgotten moment which comes back to me every year when the two-minute's silence is followed by the first hymn," he says.

It was during the war, while watching an ants' nest from a parapet, that the young Burton was converted to natural history and, after returning home in 1919, he entered King's College, London, to study zoology.

But after his war experiences, he found it difficult to concentrate on his work. His professor suggested he study sponges. "It was the best thing that could have happened," says Dr. Burton. "They are so unusual in their anatomy and in the beauty of their skeletons and, what is more, they led to my life's work."

After university, in 1925 he became assistant keeper at the British Museum in charge of sponges.

It was at this time that Dr. Burton met his future wife, Margaret. It was love at first sight. The couple married in 1929 and moved to Twickenham. They had three children: Jane, now an animal photographer living at Albury Heath; Richard, who has become a lecturer in physiology at Glasgow University; and Robert, who works as a freelance author and journalist and lives near Cambridge.

Dr. Burton developed an urge to write and, after unsuccessful attempts at fiction, starting writing articles on natural history. He began a weekly series in the *West Sussex Gazette* and had started to write natural history books when he was interrupted by the Second World War.

Although he was too old to be called up, he played an active part — as a stirrup-pump officer on fire watch duty during the blitz.

With the war over, Dr. Burton threw himself into his work with renewed vigour. In 1949, *The Story of Animal Life* was published in seven languages. Since then he has written over 100 books and contributed to many others.

During 1949 he also began his nature column for the *Daily Telegraph* which he describes as supplying "material for the kitchen sink naturalist." His articles still appear in the paper every weekend and are notable for their conciseness and lucidity.

By 1952 Dr. Burton and his family were living in Horsley

where he had turned the home into a refuge for injured and abandoned animals. The house became known locally as Pooh Corner.

A thousand animals passed through his hands and it became apparent that he needed more room to carry on the work. So, in 1958, the family moved to Weston House at Albury and, at the same time, Dr. Burton retired as deputy keeper at the British Museum to devote more time to his writing.

He found himself instantly attracted to the village. "I saw Albury for the first time from the Silent Pool and it remained me of the phrase, 'The Promised Land.' I lost my heart to Albury from that moment."

He became president of the village's produce association, Chairman of Albury Trust and founder of the village's history society.

Largely due to his efforts and money the Tudor pigeon house in Weston Yard was re-

stored to its former glory. He also established the Montgomery Memorial at Albury Heath and restored the pond at Brook.

Dr. Burton still takes an active part in village affairs. His remaining ambition is to finish his autobiography, but he intended to spend his 90th birthday "doing as little as possible." He says: "There is no great virtue in living 90 years and pestering everyone with your presence."

Asked how he would like to be remembered, he replied: "It doesn't matter how people remember me because I won't be remembered for very long. One generation later I will be totally forgotten."

Mr. George Witheridge, former chairman of Albury Parish Council, disagrees: "Dr. Burton is the father of the village and the improvements he has made to Albury will be a permanent monument to what he's achieved so far.

Time alone will tell.

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