

**Brian Carter's Country Diary****Tarka the otter  
isn't dead . . .**

WELL, I was in Tarka country again, that part of North Devon where the light of Henry Williamson's imagination still plays on the landscape.

A westerly gale was making the surf boom through the desolation of the long, storm beaches. I stood under the cliffs of Baggy in the tugging flow of the wind while dusk dismantled the silhouette of Morte Point and lights came on in Woolacombe.

From the hotel bedroom I could look down on the slow, white — smoking crumble and crash of waves sweeping Croyde Bay until darkness left only the noise.

Drinking at a pub in Georgeham around dinner time I found a photograph of Williamson framed among the usual bar paraphernalia.

There he was, defying the microscope of provincial morality to probe even the shallows of his greatness as a writer. The outward man revealed nothing of his exceptional creative ability.

I listened to the usual definitive pronouncements concerning his character, behaviour and idiosyncrasies. But the deathless prose was sufficient. It veiled the village, the farmland and the shore, and was of the indestructible human spirit and the love of creature for creature.

Later I was privileged to address the Henry Williamson Society on the writing of an animal novel. It was very moving to speak of my Dartmoor fox with three of Hen-

ry's children and his wife present in Georgeham's village hall. But what I had to say came from the heart, and speaking of eternal continuities in such company wasn't difficult.

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Long into the night the discussions continued and at times Williamson the private individual eclipsed Williamson the creator of Tarka.

Yet the place was enough, just as Grasmere and Bydal Water are enough to resurrect Wordsworth. I needed Barnstaple, Croyde and Baggy, Georgeham and the rivers Taw and Torridge.

You see, Tarka isn't dead. Everytime I turn the pages of Williamson's masterpiece the immortal otter springs from behind my eyes into a Devon stream.

I read, and Tarka whistles across the surface of my thoughts and lifts his whiskered face to mine.

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My wife and I walked the sands beyond Braunton Burrows, pursued by Tarka and Greymuzzle, with the Nineteen Eighties vanishing and Williamson's world of the 'Twenties swelling poignantly around us.

The otters bounded together over the hummocky wastes of the Burrows, rescued from time by the author's soutsight.

Striding to meet us out of the rain - blurred distance came the ghost of a young man with a stick and a dog, the misery of trench warfare etched on his face.