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HENRY WILLIAMSON IN CONVERSATION WITH KENNETH ALLSOP

The transcript from a recording of the BBC 1 Television programme PERSONAL CHOICE, broadcast on Sunday 7 January 1968. The two men sat in armchairs, facing one another. During the interview Williamson lit a cigarette.

KENNETH ALLSOP Henry Williamson is seventy-two. He has been a full-time writer all his life, except for his time as a front-line soldier in the First World War and for the eight years he farmed in Norfolk. He has published more than fifty books, probably the best known is *Tarka the Otter*, and for the past eighteen years has been working on a series of novels, the fourteenth of which has just been published.

Henry, one of the most significant moments in my life was when I was fourteen and I discovered, in a library, your book *The Lone Swallows*, and the revelation in this was that in there was someone else on earth who felt as I did about the countryside, about nature. I can only suppose a religious revelation to be of this bliss. - and intensity. So, for all my teens you were my sort of personal Maharishi, and eventually I forced my attentions upon you. I suspect that a good many of your admirers had this sort of introduction to you.

HENRY WILLIAMSON I understand the feeling so well, because when I was a young man I discovered Richard Jefferies, who wrote about the English countryside with such beauty and truth that it inspired me and set me on the same path.

KA Well, I believe that what has brought your readers to you is that there has been a single purpose running through all your books. Now, your heroes, especially Willie Maddison in your first four novels, *The Flax of Dream*, have all been prophet figures, trying to resolve the conflict between what one might put as love and lovelessness, which causes man to be at war with himself and men to be at war with each other. How would you explain this philosophy?

HW Well, when I was just eighteen, I was a private soldier in Flanders in 1914 and we had a truce with the Germans, and I saw their point of view as practically the same as my own - or our own, and it was a tremendous shock. And ever afterwards I was trying to resolve that and to create... to show the idea of beauty and truth and courage and everything like that in animals and in men.

KA Because you thought it was the lack of these things that had brought about the war?

HW Yes. I thought it was a terrible misunderstanding or a failure to understand both sides could be right in a deadly quarrel from their points of view.

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KA Have you had any self-doubt in all your writing career about yourself being regarded as a prophet figure, or is this exactly what you wanted to achieve?

HW No, I had a doubt quite often because I saw that many of my acts were not up to the ideal that I set myself.

KA What do you mean by that?

HW Well, I wanted always to be kindly towards people and to be well-mannered, but I very often failed and got angry and shouted. But later when I grew old I realised I was just human.

KA But these moments when you became angry with people, and you say you raged at them and accused them of things that perhaps you felt were wrong in yourself. Was this because the other motives were going into your writing?

HW Oh, yes. When I was writing, when I am writing still, when the work is really going, one is in a state of great harmony and joy. But the constant interruptions in life that one has - all sorts of things - can make one very fretful. I mean Blake, William Blake said that "he who desires and acts not breeds pestilence".

KA Have you always been absolutely certain of your own motives? I mean by this that you are a very powerful man in your writing. You are powerful in your magnetism and in the intense emotionalism of your writing. Does it give you satisfaction to influence people, even to dominate them?

HW No. If I see they're wrong I used to try and put them right. Then I found afterwards that I was interfering and upsetting other people.

KA But you say if you found they were wrong. You've always been certain that they were wrong. Have you had doubts about your own rightness?

HW I've had doubts about my own wrongness. One isn't always right.

KA You see, you've always seemed to me to be one of those writers whose life is indivisible from his writing. For example, Scott Fitzgerald, William Blake .... Shelley, I suppose, or others of this kind. And who lived at the same pitch of intensity in the real and the imaginative world equally, so that one couldn't really be divided from the other. This doesn't really make simple happiness very easy, does it?

HW Yes, if one is writing the whole time and freeing one's devil, as it were.

KA What do you mean by that?

HW By 'devil' I mean that we all have a certain amount of animal in us, and when man creates or tries to make beauty he is freed of that and becomes harmonious. It's a process of evolution, I think. You see

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some birds with skin and wing at the beginning and pretty crude, and then look at the beautiful colours that come and even the voices are changed. So there is a purpose in life, I think, (an) evolutionary process to create harmony and beauty - and I think that's God.

KA And do you think this beauty that comes down from God, as you see Him or It, is particularly invested in the writer?

HW Some writers, yes. Like Keats or Burns, they had this gift, it can be called supersensory perception. But it is a very beautiful thing and I think it is part of evolution.

KA You feel you have this gift?

HW I think it happened to be born in me. It was nothing to do with me, and when I realised what it was I had to look after it - because I'm a trustee. I'm just an ordinary human being, but when this gift does come, I don't know where it comes from, I feel it's inspired from other forces.

KA Have you ever felt this entanglement that I spoke of between yourself as a normal, average, everyday human being and yourself as an imaginative writer, that the two are too overlapping, too intermixed? Do you know when you're living the real life and the imaginative life?

HW Well, when I've been most happy, I've been writing, say in the morning for three hours, regularly. I look forward to it greatly. When I've done my stint I'm happy and the rest of the day is harmonious. If one gets into bad habits and stops writing then everything...

KA But what are bad habits? Because you see, you and I have had some very jolly times together, including some memorable booze-ups in Ireland and Devon...

HW That's fine, that's relaxation. But if you dodge the column, you don't do your work when you should. You say I am going to start tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow. Then you get Hamlet - tomorrow, tomorrow and tomorrow. In other words, nature is regular, and if you lead a regular life as a writer, as Arnold Bennett said one must, then one's happy. I am, at any rate. I simmer all the rest of the day, "What am I going to write tomorrow? It'll come, it'll come", and I treasure it, as though I'm a hen that's laid an egg. I shall lay another egg tomorrow.

KA Henry, you're a contradictory and complicated man and your dedication to the ideal of a new man in tune with himself and with nature and with his own family has in fact resulted in a fairly disrupted family life. Your marriages haven't worked, and now you live alone and you seldom see your children, I think. Do you ever feel that the cost of your sense of mission has been too great upon yourself and upon the people close to you?

HW No, I think the mistake I made was taking on other people's troubles

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instead of getting on with my work. I must say we're a fairly harmonious family now. I see all my children. Even my grandchildren call me Henry, which I think is a great privilege, because I want to feel equal with them. And my wife Gipsy, who is Mary of *The Pathway*, my book *The Pathway*, thinks I've done very well.

KA But, looking back...

HW So is she - she's brilliant. She's lovely.

KA I remember when you went to farm in Norfolk, your idea then, your ambition then was to found a family unit which would continue down the generations, your children would inherit the farm and you would become a farming family in the heart of England. Now, this didn't work. It became very fragmented. Why didn't it work?

HW Well, I told all this in my last novel, *Lucifer Before Sunrise*, where Phillip, who is myself, has a tremendous gap between his ideals and what is. In other words, he is a Phoenix. He comes out of the battlefield to make a perfect world as Hitler did and other people, and if you do that and insist on perfection, if you become a perfectionist, you go wrong. And you certainly can't do it on the land. You've got to be tolerant and allow this and that and the other.

KA But can you do it with human beings?

HW No, you shouldn't. You should use people for what they can do. I suppose the very fine business man is one, the very big one, who picks people to do a job and then lets them get on with it. Doesn't interfere with them.

KA You say this now from - you are seventy-two, looking back - but do you feel at the time that you did make too many harsh demands upon them?

HW Not so much that... It was a terrible time in England when there was great unemployment and you could buy land in Norfolk, for instance, for two pounds an acre. Any amount you wanted. And the arable tradition had largely gone down after twenty years of dereliction. I tried to put it on its feet. And I said, "I'm going to do it". I hadn't any money but I wrote articles for newspapers and broadcasts, and I was going to help England and in association with other people we were going to create a land fit for heroes. But it doesn't work out like that.

KA You see, critics of your books have repeatedly remarked upon your self-absorption, upon your self-torment, and one, in fact I've got a note of it here, wrote about *The Phoenix Generation* that "the hero is a figure of total isolation, ever stalked by the spectre of failure". Do you feel that the creative artist is inevitably an alienated man, and do you feel that the people around him have got to suffer for it?

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HW No. I don't think they should. In Norfolk I worked too hard, I worked eighty hours a week. I ploughed all night by the light of the moon because we were late in the autumn ploughing, and it had to be done. And I carted the beet all day and I just wore myself out and became very irritable, an exhausted man.

KA You've written several times that the artist, the visionary, should not betray his Muse, or gift or particular talent, by becoming a man of action. Well, you've done this twice. Once by trying to make this farm work - which you did for eight years - and also by becoming actively involved in politics. Do you now regret this time, do you see it as energy and time wasted from being a writer?

HW No, because I'm old enough to know now that we learn by experience and all, in the end, is part of the system of life.

KA The central contradiction in you, or so it appears to many of your friends and admiriers, is your Fascism. Your loyalty to Mosley and your defence of Hitler, which you still make. When you were active in the Fascist movement in the thirties, did you ever think it through, to consider what sort of life this might have meant for the average person living under the system, living under a Fascist State?

HW Well, I'm awfully sorry, I don't agree with that at all. I don't think Mosley, who is still my great friend - he was an ex-soldier, he was even younger than I was in 1914, and as A.J.P Taylor has shown in his Oxford History that he had the only idea for the welfare state two generations ahead. He cared for three million umemployed, he wanted to make the motor roads. He was told he couldn't get the money because the City of London would not allow the second Labour Government to have the loan. So he said, "Who rules - the City of London or the Parliament that is elected?". Then he went into the streets and his reputation of course went down like that. Because every kind of oddment got into his party and let him down - that's inevitable in a party. I saw the same thing in Hitler's land. Awful crooks in it. You must have a democracy, you must have it in Parliament. Although it's slow, it wins in the end. It must do, as Churchill said.

KA So you no longer think, in fact, that Fascism is right or could work?

HW No. It was merely a phenomenon of the Western Front.

KA What do you mean?

HW Well, when we came out of that war we said, "We are going to make a different world to that of our fathers who produced the Western Front". And everything that they thought and did we were against. Of course that is an illusion because every generation thinks that, and it takes time for the economic system to change as it has changed now. You mustn't do it quickly. And if you try and force it through quickly, you then become, in the end, a bloody-minded tyrant. When you start as Lucifer, the light-bringer, you end as the Prince of

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Darkness.

KA And yet I suppose, at that time, you were prepared to have that kind of leader-figure running Britain?

HW Yes. But not violence or anything. Many of Mosley's meetings, you know, lots of his opponents came there to smash it up. I mean...

KA But he had his own squad to smash them up.

HW Yes, to protect him. I mean, it was pretty terrifying to be in one of those meetings. They really started fighting, and knuckle-dusting and everything like that.

KA You see, you've never seemed to me to be very likely material for an authoritarian regime. I mean by this that your whole life has been lived against the grain, against convention. Now, suppose you had got your wish and you had a right-wing, an ultra right-wing Britain at that time, and suppose your writing hadn't been considered suitable propaganda for that kind of State, wouldn't you have felt that your whole spirit as a creative artist was being suffocated and crippled?

HW No. You see in Germany they were defeated, and it was a terrible, terrible time. We hadn't got that in England. We would have got in - if we did - through the vote of the people. National Socialist, we wanted to nationalise the Bank of England and prevent the export of capital abroad, which was a monstrous thing in those days, but now its achieved. And as I was saying, Taylor, A.J.P. Taylor, said Mosley was two generations ahead of his time. And if he'd stopped in Parliament, which was his place, instead of going into the streets, he would have come in much quicker.

KA There is another contradiction. I said just now that you had always lived against conventions... This isn't strictly true, because there is another contradiction in you that puzzles your friends a great deal of the time, and that is what seems to be a reverence, almost, for the rather more banal, conservative qualities, and the need to be accepted by people that you know basically, aren't your kind.

HW I don't think that's true. So many people today, they knock the old squires and everything, but that was the only organisation at the time, and the good squire looked after his people and he lived for his people.

KA But of course, this couldn't happen now, good or bad.

HW No, because the technological advances are such that that's out of date - except in one or two places. One or two friends of mine in Devon still run their estates and they're liked and they're loved because they devote their life to it as leaders. I mean they were not tyrants. They had a tremendous sense of duty and their child-

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ren were brought up in service, as an idea to serve the people. The proud words, "Ich Dien - I Serve". For the good ones, that was their idea.

KA I still find in you that there's this gap between your political beliefs, although they may be modified, I think, which are all about discipline and obedience and faith in a strong leader-figure, and your own life, which has been really quite wayward and bohemian.

HW You're assuming all that about me. I wasn't...

KA I know all this about you, Henry.

HW Well, it was probably true in the past when I was running the farm, and if things... for instance, I was lent a tractor by an unknown man called Harry Ferguson. In the war you couldn't get replacements, therefore I had to say, "You must be very careful of this. You cannot get a new engine, and we're sunk if this tractor goes down". And most people up there, they were very sloppy about machinery. I merely tried to train people how to do it, and I couldn't. For instance, they would plough in top gear and wreck the engine. Why is that being a dictator? The fact is that many people up there said you treat everybody as though they are your equals from the beginning, whereas you should start at the bottom and work up. I treated them as my equals.

KA Nevertheless, how conscious are you of the fact that all through your writing you've worked to reconcile man to himself, making human life more sensitive to beauty and understanding, and yet your personal relations have often failed exactly on these grounds.

HW I think, as I said, I interfered with people. I tried to show them what to do and how to do things when I saw they didn't know how to do it, which was a mistake. As a farmer, I should have got rid of the duds at the beginning, not tried to educate them. Nobody else would employ them before the war, some of them, and I should have got good men. In fact, many farmers said to me, "You seem to have plenty of ability, why do you have to have all these people who come and plant themselves on your farm?" Well, I sort of didn't like to turn them away. I had all sorts of phoneys down there, and they were terrible! I departed once or twice myself - left them to it. That's a weakness, if you like!

KA Well, to try to simplify this, how do you see yourself? As a man apart, who has needed to stay apart to keep his integrity, or as a misfit? I mean, do you feel that you would have fitted in more easily to conventional society, which really you've rejected in order to be a writer?

HW Well, I had to at the beginning because, you know, it was a pretty tough England in the twenties. May I just quote T.E. Lawrence. In a letter to me he said, "Our generation is infinitely wiser than the old or the young, because we've had a war to light our background, but

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nobody will believe us." Therefore, I went away and I wrote by myself, and I did, I worked and worked.

KA You see, even your attitude to the First World War puzzles many people. You've written about life on the battlefields, as I think nobody else has, with an authenticity and a vividness and a power that nobody has equalled, about the horror and horribleness of it. And yet you remain on the side of Haig and the generals - and you're certainly not a pacifist!

HW Well, I know what a general has to put up with. I know the tremendous strains - and it's so easy to blame the generals. They weren't ... you can't even always blame the politicians. It's a thing that happens, as Tolstoy shows in *War and Peace*. War comes. It's always been war, and a good general will do his best. But then, you see, we were up against people as good as ourselves in the Germans. We were the two cousin-nations of Europe, two white giants bleeding each other to death. Haig was a most sensitive man, and the Germans after the war, the German historians who knew their stuff, called him the Master of the Field. And he was, because he saw them off.

KA And yet there is this extraordinary fatalism. You say, "War must come, war comes." But all your writing, all your books, have been an attempt to make this impossible.

HW Yes, but I say that war - in the past, has always come. And when I am a writer... when I was writing *Tarka*, I didn't like otter-hunting, I didn't like many of the otter hunters, but I kept that out of my book. When I put them in I put them in as they were, almost as they saw themselves. That is what the artist does. I don't feel superior to anybody at all, when I'm writing. I'm not superior, but I know that if my gift is used properly I will do justice to all the characters.

KA I remember a phrase that you used in some newspaper articles that you did about a year ago, about returning to the battlefields of France, and you wrote that you felt better, clearer somehow, "for all I experienced". Do you think you'd have been a different man, or a less good writer, for not having been through the war?

HW Well, the war opened my eyes to a great deal. I mean, when I was first in the army I was a terrible misfit. I was rather like Churchill, I was all inside, do you see. I had rather a difficult childhood, and I withdrew into myself. But I had to learn to come out of that self. And I had a tremendous ragging. I mean, I've described this in one of my novels,* when I was stripped naked and chased up the street and doused in water because I'd done something... said something stupid as a young officer in the mess. In fact, I set fire to the colonel's newspaper when he was reading it. And they gave me a subaltern's court-martial. Well, I learned a lot from that. I

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learned not to do it again.

KA Not to set fire to your superior officer's newspaper?

HW Yes - yes.

KA Coming up to the present, you've spent eighteen to twenty years on this series of novels which some people have compared to Tolstoy and Proust, but which others have said, rather sadly... one critic said, must be written off as a gigantic aberration. Have you remained certain of yourself right through this undertaking, or have you been beset by doubts? Eighteen years is a long time to devote to one set of books.

HW Well, I conceived these novels in 1919, I was going to write them in 1929, then I needed to go farming to put myself on my feet, as it were, and become healthy and extrovert, and when I started in 1949 it took till about 1958 or '59 before I could believe in these novels.

KA And yet you were writing them during all those years. How did you make yourself go on with them?

HW Well, I did, because when I was writing them I knew they were all right but I had doubt afterwards. Maybe because I was exhausted. I'd often write all night and all day. And then I'd fall asleep in my hut in Devon, before my fire, and I'd wake up four hours later, glowing, because I'd know that what I'd written was good. But then, here again, I think my doubt was due to what T.E. Lawrence, who was behind me in many things - earlier books... he said, "You've given away too much of yourself not to feel poor...". And one does. One has to guard against the reaction to intense work.

KA Well, your career certainly had a lot of ups and downs. But, even in the downs, my impression is that you've never written commercially, that you've never deliberately adjusted what you're writing to make it sell or sell better. How important have money and material things been to you?

HW I did - when I started my career in Fleet Street in 1920 - I did go to a paper called *Titbits*. And I got fifteen shillings a column. But I tried so hard to write the stuff that they wanted and I couldn't do it, so I gave it up then and there.

KA What stuff were you writing?

HW Oh well, I think the first article I wrote was called 'Choose Your Mate by the Colour of the Optic. Blue Eyes or Brown. Which? Black Eyes barred'. Some nonsense like that! But as the editor... Well, anyhow, I didn't do any more because I really wanted to write. You see, I'd read Jefferies. He wanted to clarify humanity, like all the great writers do. And I suppose I had it in me. And I felt about Jefferies, as in a way you felt about *Tarka*, when you bicycled all the way from Hertfordshire to my field when you were a boy. In 1938, was it?

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KA In 1937, I think.

HW In 1937, yes. Well, I went to Jefferies' grave, he was dead, and sat there for a long time, feeling that he was with me in the sunshine and helping me. And he was with me after the war, when I was walking down a lane in the countryside. He was there the whole time with me. I really felt his spirit very strongly.

KA How pushed were you for money in those days?

HW Well, not very much. I had a pension from the army... and not very much of thirty per cent disability pension. I came out with mustard-gas and a tubercular lung which cured itself in Devon. And I was very grateful to the editor of the *Daily Express* in those days, who gave me a guinea and a half for a very short article which he seldom published, but he did it to help me, I know. Beverly Baxter. So I've always loved the *Express*.

KA So, really, money has never dominated your writing at all.

HW No.

KA Well, you now spend almost all your time in that hut on the hilltop in Devon that I've known for many years. But rather isolated and alone now. Do you feel to be isolated and alone in the artistic sense, that your beliefs and your ideals which you've worked for all your life, have been rejected, as they were at the start?

HW I rather feel out on a limb, but then it may be that my writing is no good. On the other hand it may mean that I'm in the tradition and that the faithful few will keep me alive. The faithful few, you know, the small minority which keep all artists alive, which keep Jefferies alive, and Hardy.

KA You say that perhaps your writing's no good. I don't think you really believe that, but you're now seventy-two, you've just had your seventy-second birthday, and almost at the end of this series of novels, fourteen of them, which have really been your life's work. Looking back, do you feel satisfaction at what you've done - or a sense of failure?

HW When I look into some of the pages of *Tarka*, or *Salar the Salmon*, or the others, I think however did I write that? Then I remember it wrote itself. The feeling comes, as you know, when you feel inspired, and I would say that there's no conceit on my part, because I believe that the collection of genes in my blood or something, the supersensory perception and racial memory, which the scientists are beginning to show the genes carry, that I just have to look after myself because I am a trustee of the gift that was inborn with me, that's my feeling.

KA Henry Williamson, thank you.