Carving the Otter

Jack Whitehead

In my garden on the Isle of Wight there are six smooth grey boulders. They were once part of the cliffs of Hartland Point in North Devon. The natural tools of water and tides have, over the centuries, removed their sharp edges, as life often removes the sharp edges from a human being. These boulders have been sculptured into shape as the tides rolled them across the sea bed to Appledore where I found them. They are constant reminders of North Devon and of Henry Williamson, whose early books - Tarka the Otter and The Village Book — made us aware of that part of England. We read them in the 1930s, and they gave us a desire to go to North Devon one day and see it all ourselves.

In 1939 my girl friend and I spent two weeks in Croyde. It seemed to be our last chance in a still peaceful world. We found a place to stay at Forda Farm, which is at the sharp bend in the road from Croyde to Georgeham. In Henry Williamson's beautiful essay 'The Stream', he mentions a waterwheel which turned a dynamo to supply electric light to the farm. It was still there in 1939, but no longer in use.

The holiday was magical. In perfect June weather we spent whole days wandering across Saunton Burrows. In those days, even in mid-summer, the place was deserted. We would wave a towel from Crow Point, and eventually an Appledore fisherman would sail across the estuary in his lug-sailed boat and take us back to Appledore for tea and a bus back to Croyde. The memory remained vividly in our minds throughout the troubled years of the war.

The war was over, and we were living in Hertfordshire on a farm in a caravan. Married then, with two small children, I had a job helping to make puppet films. This suddenly collapsed, and we were without an income and short of money. North Devon was still calling and we fled to Croyde, and lived in our tent during one of the wettest summers for many years. Flooded out, we moved into a summer hut that had the appropriate name of 'Why Worry', and we didn't. We were happy in North Devon. We had realised an ambition.

By a stroke of luck I managed to obtain some work for a furniture firm in Barnstaple. I walked into their office with a few carvings in a rucksack, and without much confidence, asked if I could be of any use to them. They told me that I had come at the right time as they needed some pieces of wood sculpture for a forthcoming exhibition in London. Although my experience of carving was somewhat limited, I was asked to do them. I could hardly believe my good fortune. I had always wanted to earn my living as a sculptor, and this was the best experience that could have come my way. The list of carvings the firm needed was daunting. Various animals, a group of a mare and a foal, a life-sized head of a child and a female torso. However, poverty and enthusiasm are

splendid incentives, and for six months I worked away on blocks of elm. The result seemed satisfactory, and I felt I had survived, and had also learnt a great deal. In the meantime during the harsh winter of 1946–47, when the sea froze on Croyde Beach, we moved into a summer chalet, and we survived that also.

In the Spring everything changed; the carvings were finished and the sun was shining on the sands. I was offered the perfect job of looking after Croyde Beach, and given the grand sounding title of Resident Beach Manager - resident because Beach Cottage among the sand dunes went with the job. It was a wonderful, free life with busy summers in the open air. Our children ran wild among the dunes, and learnt to swim in the warm rock pools. We found time to swim in the surf, and at night when the tide was right we went fishing with a seine net in the waves on the beaches of Croyde, Putsborough and Saunton. It was an idyllic life, and although I received no money in the winter the cottage was free, and I managed to earn enough money by carving and working with a travelling puppet theatre to keep us going until the Spring.

On our walks through the lanes near Ox's Cross we would look through the gate into Henry Williamson's field, and wonder if we dare call on him. We decided that we could not intrude. We often met him on the Baggy cliff paths, but apart from a greeting we were too shy to start a conversation. I had to wait until 1972 before we met and talked in Appledore. We shared his bag of homemade biscuits as we watched the launch of the replica of the 'Golden Hind'.

When the Henry Williamson Society decided to restore the writing hut at Ox's Cross, I wanted to pay a tribute to the man whose writing we admired and enjoyed, and who indirectly brought North Devon into our lives.

I decided to carve an otter. I had a beautiful piece of teak that had once been part of a mast, set up by Marconi on the Freshwater cliffs on the Isle of Wight in 1903 for his early radio experiments. For the base of the carving I chose a piece of the bark of a giant redwood tree that I found in California. The curious twisted grain suggested flowing water. The redwood tree was a real giant, and was probably a good-sized sapling when Sir Francis Drake anchored the original 'Golden Hind' in Drake's Bay a few miles along the Californian coast in 1579.

I soon discovered how little I knew about the anatomy of an otter. I studied photographs, watched films, and made sketches and clay models, before I started on the block of teak. As I chipped away the unwanted wood to reveal the otter hidden in its depths, I thought of the young Henry Williamson, working alone at night in his Georgeham cottage under great difficulty, bringing Tarka to life with the magic of his words. His dedication and knowledge seemed to have enabled him to enter into the mind of the animal, and to know how it would think and act. The book he wrote then - Tarka the Otter - has helped to make us all aware of the importance of conserving the wild creatures that share our world. It is now part of the heritage of English literature, and has given pleasure and interest to people all over the world, and will continue to do so for generations yet unborn. No writer could wish for more.



Bitch playing with cubs. Young Tarka is on the right