## BOOK REVIEWS

HENRY WILLIAMSON: THE MAN, THE WRITINGS. A Symposium. Tabb House, Padstow, 1980. 165 pp. £6.95.

Ronald Walker

This symposium is the work of Father Brocard Sewell, who has drawn together tributes to Henry Williamson of ten contributors, as well as contributing one himself. There are also the text of Ted Hughes' memorial address at the service in St Martin's-in-the-Fields on 1 December 1977, and two sets of notes by Williamson himself, one on The Flax of Dream and A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight, the other entitled simply 'An Affirmation'.

Father Sewell explains in the Foreword how the book was conceived, after Williamson's funeral, as "old friends stood in his field at Ox's Cross, talking and thinking of him while ancient sunlight fell on them and warmed them". The result is, on the whole, satisfying, though the quality of the contributions varies greatly. As the editor admits: "with so controversial a personality...it cannot have been easy to achieve a balance and avoid distortion." For those who value the more personal and emotional approach, there are the contributions of two of Henry Williamson's former secretaries, Alexandra Burgess and Kerstin Hegarty. For those who seek a more academic appraisal of his work, there are Hugh Cecil's 'Henry Williamson, Witness of the Great War' or Roger Mortimore's appreciation of A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight. Sylvia Bruce the novelist contributes 'Some Notes on the Nature Writings', in which she observes that Richard Jefferies' prose was "plain, sweet, lyrical, and true" and comments on its influence on Williamson's. I missed that influence in her own essay, and felt that it was the one overwritten section of the book, adding little to my understanding of the writer or the man. From Alexandra Burgess and Kerstin Hegarty much may be forgiven that seems a little idealised or bathed in sentiment. They knew the man and worked with him. But personal grief at his dying is a delicate emotion to be put into words, and Alexandra Burgess's disclosure of it might prove embarrassing to some readers. Among the women writers, Diana Mosley's brief testimony is movingly simple, direct, and sympathetic.

The great virtue of Hugh Cecil's essay 'Witness of the Great War' is that it attempts to assess Williamson's place among writers about that war (and a useful bibliography of them is appended). He finds Henry Williamson standing out among a host of "brilliant and less able authors"; less able, that is, than Graves, Blunden, Sassoon, or Frederic Manning. He deplores the lack of attention to Williamson's war novels by the reading public and also by Professor Fussell, in whose monumental The Great War and Modern Memory there is barely a mention of them. This essay is a cogent argument for the importance of the five central volumes of A Chronicle to the social historian as well as to the general reader. Hugh Cecil's contribution is clear, judicious, and sensitive and, for me, the most readable and helpful in the symposium.

It is pleasant to find David Hoyle re-examining The Flax of Dream. I first read Dandelion Days on top of a 16A bus travelling to and from St John's Wood, the district where I was teaching in 1938, and those early days marked the beginning of an admiration for Williamson that has lasted for forty-two years. The one-volume edition of the tetralogy is still, miraculously, on my shelves despite its numerous borrowings. David Hoyle finds it lacking in character-development, in exploration into complex relationships, and in a "truly consequential plot"; "the concentration," he says, "is upon atmosphere - the atnosphere of a dream." He assesses it as "a failure as a work of fiction", but many of us will prefer a failure of this kind to some of the obnoxious successes of lesser writers.

It is Roger Mortimore who examines A Chronicle, which is a masterpiece, if not the masterpiece, the work with which Williamson was destined to crown a lifetime's achievement in the novel. Its neglect, says Roger Mortimore, "raises serious questions about the authenticity of English intellectual life". From that challenging observation he goes on to give a finely succinct outline of the events of all fifteen volumes, followed by an examination of the art, the sheer inspired industry, the fire of the spirit, with which Williamson forged such "intractable material" into a sustained unity. He likens A Chronicle to Elgar's symphonies: "English attempts to contain a totality of experience".

Roger Mortimore is not the only one among the contributors to touch upon the perplexing question of Williamson's association with British Fascism, and the effect of his political views upon his poularity. He quotes George Orwell saying to Middleton Murry, "I can respect anyone who is willing to face unpopularity, however much I disagree with him." The words are relevant to Henry Williamson: he saw himself as a prophet, but Ted Hughes in his memorial address is candid enough to call him "a political extremist full of unpoular pronouncements". That has been the fate of many prophets from Jeremiah and Jonah onwards. The 'Affirmation' by Henry Williamson himself makes clearer the nature of his steely political intensity:

> The horror of innumerable civilians burning in coke ovens called crematoria is the horror of hundreds of thousands of civilians burning in Hamburg, Breslau, and other German towns set on fire by the phosphorus bombs of the RAF....

It is one of the fascinating aspects of Father Sewell's compelling and rich and uneven and thought-provoking symposium that the problem of Williamson's allegiance to the "great man across the Rhine, whose life symbol is the happy child" is not baulked or watered down. There is a photograph in the book of Henry Williamson at an anti-Vietnam War demonstration in London in the 1960s. He is standing at a police barricade in Downing Street, looking towards the camera over his left shoulder; and the fierce, determined, forbidding, compassionate strength in that expression says, perhaps, as much about Williamson as all the loving, admiring, quizzical, assessing judgements that make up these absorbing pages of testimony and tribute.

Ian Niall, PORTRAIT OF A COUNTRY ARTIST: C.F. TUNNICLIFFE, R.A., 1901-1972. Gollancz, 1980. £10.

Alan Dilnot

The work of Charles Tunnicliffe has long delighted those who enjoy well illustrated books on 'country themes'. It is especially dear to Henry Williamson's readers, since they very frequently first encountered their author in Tunnicliffe-embellished editions of the animal sagas. The conjunction of this gifted country artist with the brilliant creator of animal fiction produced something memorable: nothing couls surpass these books for the way in which the pictures give discreet amplification to the words. But except for being equally hard-working and dedictaed, Tunnicliffe and Williamson were utterly dissimilar personalities. Tunnicliffe was content that his life should be free of stirring incident. He was born too late for the First World War, too soon for the Second. A scholarship took him from a secure childhood on a Cheshire farm to the Royal College of Art, where he worked diligently for four years without ever being snared by the temptations of London Bohemianism. In 1928 he married and, it seems, lived happily ever after. And so for forty years amid the domestic and rural tranquility he prized, he dedicated himself to the craft he loved. In that time his output was tremendous: one meets his work in many books and always with a welcome. I particularly admire his illustrations for George Ewart Evans's The Horse in the Furrow (1960), where the social historian attempt to evoke the rural past is matched by Tunnicliffe's suggestions of the intertwined hardships and satisfactions of rural life. He retained his skill to the end, as we can see in his work for Ian Niall's To Speed the Plough (1977), although there is occasionally evident some loss of sharpness of vision. If we remember his achievements in realms besides that of book illustrations we must regard Tunnicliffe as one of the leading artists of the century.

The book under review is essentially a biographical tribute, but as Tunnicliffe was really a straightforward, simple man his life's story is rightly made subordinate to his life's work. That work is richly represented here, with over fifty illustrations in colour, and over a hundred

in duotone and monochrome. There are several examples of his early etchings, and in these we can already see his main characteristics. His animal and human studies alike are virtually without moral or social comment. His harvesters and thatchers, his butchers and farmers seem to operate almost as necessarily as grass grows or birds fly: the scenes are timeless, and Tunnicliffe rarely suggests that the world ought to be other than it is. In 'To the Slaughter' (1925) the determination of the farmer and labourer to conquer the pig, and its desperate and painful resistance, are as powerfully caught as the dealings between man and beast in Hogarth's 'The Four Stages of Cruelty'. But in Tunnicliffe's view such struggles are unavoidable: the men are not sadists, but are doing what their work requires; and the scene is intended not as an emblem of a corrupt society, but merely depicts without questioning. Tunnicliffe's art is reflective, not critical. His search is always for representational exactness, a search taken to its end in the post mortem drawings of birds to which he gave so much attention in the latter part of his career. "He was at home to anybody who knocked on his door bringing dead or injured birds," reports Niall. This aspect of him might remind us of Stubbs, but he was really closer to Thomas Bewick in his avoidance of sensationalism and in its deliberately narrow focus.

Though Williamson sought an equal accuracy, he was always on the watch for the deeper meanings that might lie behind the visible world. It was this that so perplexed Tunnicliffe in the commission to illustrate The Star Born. To Tunnicliffe, who held fast to what was tangible and could be measured, 'fantasy' must have seemed a kind of artistic untruth. Many years later he declined to illustrate T.H. White's The Once and Future King, wisely no doubt, since it was even more allegoriaal than The Star Born. (I wish, however, that Tunnicliffe had taken on White's The Goshawk.)

In any case, Williamson the man was not congenial to his illustrator. Whereas Tunnicliffe kept his personal life strictly distinct from his art, Williamson made sure that his life and his fiction would one day be very hard to separate. We know that in at least one case - the move to

Norfolk - Williamson planned his life purposely to acquire 'copy'. We know too that, glorying in the creative temperament, he could be very difficult.

Nevertheless, contact with him was perhaps the liveliest thing that ever happened to Tunnicliffe, even though he rued it. This book's most entertaining chapter by far is 'The World of Henry Williamson'. Not that Niall treats Williamson with any sort of justice. He calls him insulting, insensitive, disturbed. He suggests that he was snobbish about people, and hypocritically sentimental about animals. Niall has had access to over sixty letters in which, as he puts it, Williamson "burdened" the Tunnicliffes with worries about his romantic attachments, and also had the temerity to offer criticisms of the artist's work. "That bloody man Williamson", amongst his other sins, would wickedly play Wagner "full blast" at his guests.

There is no need for us to quarrel with any of this on Williamson's behalf. But it is irritating that while Niall disparages Williamson he should show so little knowledge of his books and say so little about the place of Tunnicliffe's pictures in them. This is sad when one remembers that these were probably the most important commissions that Tunnicliffe ever received. Niall concludes that Williamson never "made his mark" as a novelist, yet one wonders whether Niall has read anything later than the book he calls A Norfolk Farm. He rather derides Williamson for revealing "how he had suffered from the domination of others ever since childhood... All this had been mental torture which had come to a head in 1914-1918, but still went on. But surely such a preoccupation in a novelist is no more reprehensible than Tunnicliffe's absorption in measuring the smelly corpses of birds. All creative artists are entitled to their obsessions provided they bring them into balance in their work.

The Williamson chapter, then, is very one-sided, but the book as a whole is delightful. It should send us back to the bookshops to look for more volumes "with Tunnicliffe". Its detailed bibliography will be a great aid in this - although it does omit to list the dust-jacket that Tunnicliffe designed for On Foot in Devon (1933).