HENRY WILLIAMSON AND HIS WRITINGS - A PERSONAL VIEW

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In 1960 I wrote an essay on Henry Williamson for the Aylesford Review in which I expressed the hope that the completion of what eventually became his fifteen-volume novel A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight would finally bring him the wide recognition he deserved. It was whistling in the dark, and I knew it was. The Chronicle, like Dorothy Richardson's Pilgrimage, is somehow too personal, too subjective, to find a place in the ranks of great novels. Yet there was always that slim chance that some twist of fate might make Henry 'fashionable'. And it seemed to me tragic that a writer of Williamson's stature would, in fact, probably die 'unrecognised'. There is something very sad in the spectacle of a man driven by an ambition to succeed, when you can see perfectly well that his chances are a thousand to one. To tell him so would be brutal and tactless; you can only make encouraging noises, and hope that fate will change its policy towards him. Yet Henry's own peculiar personality made it reasonably certain that it never would.

The truth is that he was a man who lacked self-confi-

ence. And this was something that dawned on you only after getting to know him moderately well. First impressions were excellent, as Ruth Tomalin points out in the opening essay of the memorial symposium: "A memory of Henry Williamson in a Hampstead cafe in 1967; with the striking looks of his later years, silver hair, dark sea-tan, brilliant hazel eyes becoming deep set. He was talking very quietly about dieldrin and what it was doing to the peregrine falcons..."

But the words "talking quietly" make him sound self-possessed, like Owen Wister's Virginian; and Henry, even in his seventies, was about as self-possessed as a character out of Dostoevsky. He was always too tense, too nervous, too emotional, thin-skinned to the point of paranoia. I can recall a scene that seems to me more typical. Henry turned up at our house one afternoon in the sixties with an attractive girl whom he introduced as his secretary; they were on their way to somewhere or other, and I think we offered to put them up. My brother was also staying with us; and, since he loves music, we spent most of his visit playing gramophone records. Henry was also a music lover, and requested a piece of Wagner - I think it was the Tristan prelude. As the music filled the room, my brother made some remark to me across the room. Instantly Henry turned on him and snarled: "Shut up!" Fortunately, the music was so loud that my brother was oblivious. It was just as well; he also has a temper, and might easily have knocked Henry down. But that was typical. He was in somebody else's house, drinking his wine and about to eat his food; you might have expected him to make an effort not to be offensive. But he simply had no control of his emotions.

Readers of Tarka the Otter or Salar the Salmon would find it difficult to believe that the author was a thin-skinned monomaniac; yet the clues are there if you look for them. There is, to begin with, the tendency to over-write, to use 'poetic' language where concrete expressions would do a better job - this gives away the element of show-off in his character. Then there is the over-all trend of the books - the poor, hunted creature destroyed by man's lack of feeling for nature; and to anyone who

knew Williamson, this gives away the self-pity that is so apparent in the 'human' novels. I can even imagine it in his discourse about the effect of dieldrin (whatever that is) on falcons: that is to say, what seemed to be a plea for wild birds would really be Henry's attempt to impress you with his concern for nature, and to somehow emphasise that the world - as he knew only too well - is a nasty and unjust place...

This may sound as if I have secret cause to dislike Williamson; nothing could be further from the truth. We always got on well together because I took care to tread carefully around his self-esteem. At the same time, I felt an immense sympathy and pity for him. He was an 'outsider' if ever there was one. Like so many of those misfits of the 19th century - Melville, Poe, Baudelaire - he had a deep conviction of his own uniqueness without being quite convinced of his genius. So he seemd doomed to remain on a kind of treadmill, always working away frantically at some vast novel that would finally bring him recognition, yet somehow prevented from achieving success by something in his own temperament.

I met Williamson under rather amusing circumstances in 1957. I was staying with the writer Negley Farson, who lived a couple of miles away from Henry, on the coast of North Devon. I'd heard all about Henry from Negley's son Dan, and from Kenneth Allsop, whose novel Adventure Lit Their Star had been deeply influenced by Williamson's nature writing. I had read Tarka the Otter in my teens and been enormously impressed; I was not critical enough to feel it was overwritten, and saw it only as a magnificently objective protrait of the wild moorland country and its inhabitants. So I was surprised to hear that Henry was not much liked in the Georgeham area of North Devon, and that most of his friends were sooner or later alienated by his neurotic egotism. Negley and his wife Eve had quarreled with Henry long ago; so if Dan wanted to see 'the hermit of Ox's Cross', he had to keep his intentions a secret. And, one afternoon, Dan and I and my girlfriend Joy set out, ostensibly for a stroll along the beach - in fact, to visit Henry.

Like everyone else, I was struck by his good looks

and his military bearing; he looked and sounded like a retired colonel. Joy, predictably, thought he was stunningly attractive. Henry's wife, a pretty girl who had been a teacher of gymnastics, gave us tea, and Henry produced his latest manuscript and read us a dozen pages or so. I expected it to be about animals - or possibly about the first world war (he had just written The Golden Virgin). In fact, it was a defence of his attitude to 'fascism', specifically to Sir Oswald Mosley's Union Movement. I had met Mosley, and found him brilliant and enormously likeable; so this was a matter on which we immediately established a bond of sympathy. Henry read on for what seemed hours, with the consequence that it was dusk when we left. Dan asked me what I thought about him, and I said I'd found him impressive, but perhaps rather too talkative. Dan smiled ironically. "He intended to be." "Intended?" "That's typical Henry. He knows we're not supposed to see him, so he wants us to be late for dinner, just to stir things up..."

Henry's friends made a joke of the fact that he always carried a wad of manuscript in his inside pocket, and would read it at the drop of a hat. It must have been shortly thereafter that I walked into the Savage Club - in the days when we had been forced to move to cramped quarters in Covent Garden - and found Henry sitting at the bar with Hugh Ross Williamson and Wee Georgie Wood. I made the mistake of asking Henry how the new book was going, and Ross Williamson gave a grimace of alarm. But it was too late; Henry reached into his inside pocket, saying: "Oddly enough, I just happen to have the latest few pages with me...", and treated us to a reading that went on until the bar became too full to hear what he said.

But later that day, I had the chance to observe the other aspect of his character: the pride that gave him genuine dignity. We had spent the afternoon together and then gone to a party. He had to catch the night train back to Exeter. As I was about to leave him, he asked if I could lend him ten shillings for the taxi. I said: "For heaven's sake, take five pounds - you might need it." "No, ten shillings is exactly what I need." He said it firmly, without taking offense, but I found myself feeling embarrassed. He was, relatively speaking, a poor man; he

needed the ten shillings to get to his train on time, but to offer him more implied charity. And, in spite of his self-pity, he was not the sort of person you wanted to insult with charity. A couple of days later, a ten shilling note arrived from him in the post.

In order to write the long essay about him, I settled down to reading a pile of his books. One of the most revealing is an early 'novel' called The Sun in the Sands. It begins by describing how, after being demobbed from the first world war, he climbed on his motor cycle and roared off to North Devon, where he intended to live. His father had thrown him out of the house; he consoled himself by telling himself that Shelley and Francis Thompson had both had the same experience. The description of his rainy ride to North Devon has stuck in my mind ever since; and when I took the book off the shelf to renew its acquaintance the other day, I found myself reading on and on. The description of his early days in Skirr Cottage, where he wrote Tarka the Otter, is excellent. But when a friend - a Swinburnian poet named Julian - comes to live with him, something begins to go wrong with the book. Henry and Julian got on badly; when Henry became tutor to a girl named Barleybright, Julian remarked perceptively: "Barleybright will learn a lot from old Harry. But only about old Harry." A niggling, personal tone creeps into the book, and it continues as we are told how he was forced to resign from the local tennis club because of his "unconventional reputation". There is a definite note of masochism, which brings to mind the Dostoevsky of Notes from Underground and The Eternal Husband: the man who cannot resist scratching his sores. And when he goes on to describe an abortive love affair with a girl called Annabelle, the reader begins to sense that he has decided that the effort of being honest is too much; the book begins to drift into fiction. Later, when we are told that Annabelle has now fallen in love with Williamson, but that he no longer cares about her, it seems a little too much like wish-fulfilment. At the end of the book, the girl Barleybright falls in love with the Byronic and misanthropic writer, but dies in an accident. You get the feeling that Williamson is saying: "So you see, fate deprived me of my only chance of a disinterested love and devotion..." The self-pity and wish-

fulfilment are reminiscent of the episode where Tom Sawyer attends his own funeral. It reminds us of a remark by a literary hostess that he quotes near the beginning of the book: that he is suffering from a delayed adolescence. Williamson's trouble was that he suffered from a delayed adolescence until the day he died.

What caused it? He is inclined to blame his father, who had also, he tells us, felt "disprised...when he was but a small boy". He also blames the first world war, which used up five years of his life, from the age of 19 to 23. Yet the war probably turned him into a writer. The experience of the 'test to destruction' (a title he uses for one of the war novels), affected Williamson as it affected Hemingway; it aroused a latent sense of the drama of existence, and deepened his mystical feeling for nature - a feeling that had developed through the reading of Richard Jefferies. As a child Williamson loved Jefferies's nature books; but it was during the war that he read The Story of My Heart, and decided he wanted to become a nature writer.

His first novel, The Beautiful Years, had been accepted before he left London. It is an account of his own childhood, owing much to Jefferies. It is an idyllic novel, and Williamson later admitted that it was almost pure escapism - his attempt to put the great war behind him. It came out when he was in Devon, in 1921; critics were respectful but unenthusiastic. In the recently published symposium, David Hoyle points out that the cycle of four novels, beginning with The Beautiful Years, derives from Wordsworth's Prelude, with its notion that "the child is father to the man"; Hoyle goes on: "It is a pleasant enough book, but it is essentially a children's novel, an extended reverie..." Williamson went on to write the next two novels of the series - Dandelion Days and The Dream of Fair Women - straight after The Beautiful Years, and they also appeared in the early twenties. Understandably, they made little impact. Unlike Hemingway, Williamson seems to have no strong sense of reality. Williamson wanted to save civilisation with a gospel of nature mysticism; but he himself was not a genuine poet or nature mystic. What he really wanted was fame, recognition, to be acknowledged as a prophet. The mysticism is all a bit too literary and self-conscious.

Fortunately, Williamson had also conceived the idea for a book about an otter, and he settled down to work on this after finishing The Dream of Fair Women. In a later introduction to his collected animal stories, he describes how he wrote Tarka under considerable difficulties. His wife was suffering agonies from cystitis, and the baby had some complaint that made it cry all night. Williamson describes how he wrote by lamplight, with the baby on one arm, in their tiny cottage. He had told the same story to Kenneth Allsop, whose early novel about a bird is at least as good as Tarka. Allsop, of course, was a very successful journalist, who later became a television personality. But he once told me how much he envied Williamson those early years in Devon, when he spent his days walking over the moors and his nights writing by lamplight. Allsop had become a successful journalist; he said that it would be impossible to go back to the days when he had no money, and write more of the books he really wanted to write. He had become too accustomed to driving a sports car and having a bottle of whisky in the cupboard.

Williamson remained all his life at the other extreme. Tarka the Otter, which appeared in 1927, brought him the Hawthornden Prize; it brought him recognition, but not fame. (Teaching in America in the 1960s, I was surprised to discover that my students had never heard of Williamson - not even the animal books.) After Tarka, he wrote the last of the Flax of Dream novels, The Pathway - obviously hoping that his new-found recognition would carry it to success. But it fared no better than the other three volumes. What people now wanted from him was 'animal books'. He gave them another in 1935 - Salar the Salmon, which did as well as Tarka. But, to Williamson's disgust, the public seemed to have no desire to read his 'human' novels.

Where the critics were concerned, Williamson made his fatal mistake in 1936, when the four volumes of The Flax of Dream appeared in a one volume edition; the Foreword contains the sentence: "I salute the great man across the Rhine whose life symbol is the happy child". In retrospect, this sounds much worse than it did at the time, when Hitler was simply an interesting new European leader

who was dragging Germany out of the slump. But in the following year the Spanish Civil War had begun; as far as European intellectuals were concerned, the battle lines were now drawn - and Williamson was on the wrong side. For years, he had felt that his career as a writer was sliding downhill; a novel called The Gold Falcon was actually published anonymously in 1933 - presumably because he thought the critics had got it in for him, and wanted to see how a book without his name would fare. The answer was: as badly as ever. In 1933 appeared a book by which he set enormous store: The Star Born, a kind of mystical allegory written in an overblown, poetic prose. This was the book that Willie Maddison - the hero of Flax of Dream - was supposed to have written, and which he is forced to burn (at the end of The Pathway) to attract attention to his danger when trapped by the rising tide. (He fails, of course, and is drowned.) This was also attacked. So in the mid-thirties, Williamson decided to give up writing, and to become a farmer in Norfolk. His account of that venture, in The Story of a Norfolk Farm (1941), reveals what his nature books make clear: that he was not really a countryman at all, but a selfish, tormented, neurotic writer who didn't care much for his fellow human beings or for nature in the raw. As his fellow human beings in this case were his farm hands, the venture was understandably a failure. Moreover, when the war came, he was interned briefly under Regulation 18B; and when released, was regarded with deep suspicion by his neighbours. Williamson's version of his life during the war appeared in 1948 as The Phasian Bird. Its hero is interned as a spy, returns to live on his farm among hostile neighbours, and watches it slowly turn to waste. And then, typically, he is shot trying to to save the life of a golden pheasant. The emotional machinery is all a little too self-evident: Williamson, the misunderstood idealist and nature lover, killed when doing a good deed...The self-pity emerges repeatedly in the way he kills off his heroes.

Still, he felt he had something important to say, and nobody had yet taken any notice. What exactly was it? Well, he wanted to talk about the horror of the war, and his feeling - which seems to have dated from the Christmas truce of 1914 - that all men are brothers. Then there

was the Wordsworthian nature mysticism, with its heavy debt to Richard Jefferies. Williamson was a passionate admirer of Jefferies's After London, a book about some future date when London has been destroyed and nature takes over again. It is a dangerous kind of book to admire because it is pure romantic nostalgia - Jefferies's revenge on civilisation. Williamson's animal books are all pervaded with the spirit of After London, his feeling that cities are a pollution on the face of the earth.

It all sounds vague enough; and indeed, it is. 'Nature' is not really an answer to the cruelties and injustices of the world, as Williamson the farmer discovered. Nevertheless, he felt he had failed to make his point, and decided to begin all over agin. The result was A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight, the novel which Roger Mortimore suggests is "the one English novel to rival Tolstoy".

Undoubtedly, the early volumes contain his finest work. Williamson had a real feeling for the late Victorian age, and he creates it with Dickensian nostalgia and a fine eye for concrete detail. The first volume, The Dark Lantern, is devoted to Richard Maddison, the father of the hero, a countryman who is forced to work in London. One of the crucial passages in the novel describes how, waiting for his wife to have a baby, he reads a journal left by his owr father; it denounces modern materialism, and the life of the cities, particularly the city of London. Richard wonders fearfully: "How could the city be wrong? The city was like - the Royal Family..." Williamson has sown the seed of both the mystical and the political ideas of the novel. The second volume, Donkey Boy, covering Phillip Maddison's childhood, is in every way a better book than the parallel volume about Phillip's cousin Willie, The Beautiful Years, more concrete and alive. Unlike The Flax of Dream, this is not escapism. And Williamson has made a real attempt at sympathetic understanding of his own father - of his disappointments, and why he was unable to offer his son the love he needed. Admittedly, the pace is very slow; each volume is four hundred pages long and covers pnly a few years of Phillip's life. But Williamson is so much in charge of his material that there is no sense of long-windedness. The trouble is that he has still not succeeded in eliminating the over-personal

note, the self-pity, the tendency to beat his breast and over-react. In the first two volumes, you feel he is hanging on to the self-pity with a tremendous self-restraint; but in Young Phillip Maddison, he begins to let go. Phillip is in some ways a most irritating character: as Hugh Cecil remarks in the symposium, "unstable, wild, self-hating, hypersensitive, imaginative, provocative and given to foolish and irritating pranks". In the fourth volume, How Dear Is Life, Phillip goes to war, and in the fifth, A Fox Under My Cloak, he is being ragged by the officers in a territorial unit for being an upstart - typically, he listens outside a door as someone pulls his character to pieces. Once more, we are back with the familiar old Williamson with his neurotic craving for self-esteem.

Publication of The Golden Virgin in 1961 marked Williamson's closest approach to being a best-seller. As a battle piece it is remarkable, and Kenneth Allsop praised it as one of the great war books. But even here there is a false note; Williamson involves Phillip with Lily Cornford, a kind of idealised 'girl next door' who worships him; she is arbitrarily killed off in a Zeppelin raid at the end of the book. Again, Williamson seems to be announcing to the world that death has snatched from him his only hope of ideal happiness; somehow it produces the impression that he is trying to build himself up into something rather bigger and more important than he is.

It seems to me that the novel begins to go downhill after the sixth volume, although the next two, Love and the Loveless and A Test to Destruction, show only minimal deterioration. The trouble is that Williamson is getting to the part of the story that he tells in The Sun in the Sands - the early days as a writer - and he feels that self-justification is required. What Williamson intends to tell now is the story of how Phillip wrote an autobiographical novel - the tetralogy has become a trilogy - and a successful novel about an otter, how he became an admirer of Hitler and Sir Hereward Birkin (Sir Oswald Mosley), how he moves to Devon, and his ideal first wife, Barley, dies in childbirth. (Williamson seems to have this obsessive need to insist that he lost the love of his life through the cruelty of fate; in fact, the majority

of his close relationships with women seem to have been broken up because he was an intolerable husband or lover, selfish, bad-tempered and neurotic - 'Tarka the Rotter', as Negley Farson liked to call him.) I shall not attempt to summarise the remaining seven novels in the series because I have been unable to read them in toto, with the single exception of the final volume, The Gale of The World. This I found shocking because it reveals how far he has lost control of his material. It rambles on, with a mixture of autobiography, fantasy and wish-fulfilment, leaving Phillip in the arms of the aristocratic Melissa Wilby. Phillip tells her: "You have brought love to me, love that dissolves arrogance and hatred." But you feel that nothing will ever dissolve Williamson's arrogance and hatred. The climax of the book, the Lynmouth flood, seems arbitrarily chosen to provide a suitably Wagnerian ending. But the book is, quite simply, too personal; he is again scratching old sores and regurgitating old venom. There is an acidic portrait of Negley Farson as the American writer Osgood Nilson, of whom he writes primly: "Self-knowledge, in relation to the defects of others, was denied him; so he remained a second-rate or superficial writer." Williamson could be describing himself. If Williamson had simply portrayed Farson's alcoholism and capacity for virulent abuse, he would have been perfectly fair; but he shows Nilson involved in acts of calculated meanness; and whatever Farson's faults, he was never mean. Unfortunately, Williamson was; and it is because this can be sensed in the later volumes that A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight ends on a level that is so far below its beginning.

My hope that the completion of the Chronicle would bring Williamson recognition was not realised. He was seventy-three when its last volume appeared, and he lived on to be eighty-one. I saw him for the last time in 1973. His last novel, The Scandaroon, had appeared (in 1972), and I interviewed him on Westward Television. My producer, John Bartlett, was worried about having Henry on the programme, having, apparently, experienced difficulties with him before. But Henry was mellow and good-humoured; and as we sat in the Westward canteen drinking coffee- and later, wine - there was a definite feeling of affection between us. We had known one another for sixteen years,

and he knew that I regarded his lack of recognition as a scandal. At seventy-seven he was as upright and as handsome as ever, and the make-up girl thought he was 'sexy'. Watching him as he chattered amiably with announcers and cameramen in the bar, I thought again how sad it was that he was such an explosive mixture of Jekyll and Hyde. Without the Hyde, he would have been one of the greatest English writers of his generation.

It may seem that I have dipped my own pen in acid to write about him. But then, after reading the symposium, I felt it was time someone tried to tell the precise truth about him. I do not mean that the writers are dishonest: most of them hint pretty plainly at his faults. But the main aim of the book is literary assessment; and on this level it achieves its purpose admirable. It is an excellent and comprehensive guide to Williamson's books, and a mine of information for some future biographer. The three women who provide personal portraits - Ruth Tomalin, Kerstin Hegarty and Alexandra Burgess - remind me that women found him fascinating, and felt that this personal fascination more than made up for his less pleasing qualities. Alexandra Burgess, a tall and pretty girl who turned up on Williamson's doorstep to tell him how much she admired his books, and who later became his secretary, says: "There were times when he was an extremely difficult man to work for; but he was also compelling, delightful, great fun, with a wicked sense of humour, and invariably kind and generous." He was basically kind and generous; and only the unsatisfied craving for self-esteem - and the esteem of others - triggered off his worst qualities. But I still think that Negley Farson's description of him: "That elfin son of a bitch", comes closest to pinning down the best and worst of him.