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THE POLITICS OF HENRY WILLIAMSON

Diana Mosley

DURING THE NINETEEN-THIRTIES Henry Williamson was attracted to Sir Oswald Mosley's British Union for two reasons. At that time Henry was living in Norfolk, and struggling with the near-impossible task of turning a wilderness into a productive, well-run farm. Already a well-known writer, his book *Tarka the Otter* had won the Hawthornden Prize and was a best-seller. Henry invested the proceeds in his farm; land could be bought for £10 an acre in those days.

The "National Government" had turned half of Britain into an agricultural slum. Only the richest land could pay its way. This disastrous policy came to an abrupt end with the war and the U-boat threat, and since then English agriculture has become among the most successful in the world. The unfortunate Henry Williamson, beset with worries, read Mosley's policy for agriculture and agreed with it. Mosley himself was a country man who had a strong sentimental tie with farming, but apart from that he thought it almost as dangerous to allow the production of food to run down in the way it was doing as was the policy of disarmament in an armed world. Here also Henry Williamson agreed with him. A meeting between the two men was arranged by Dorothy Lady Downe, a member of British Union who was a Norfolk neighbour of Henry's. They liked and admired each other.

When he visited Germany, Henry Williamson was astonished by the dynamic achievements of National Socialism. Even thirty-six years after the end of the second world war, these achievements are a taboo subject, but they are nevertheless a fact.

The second and more important reason for Henry's adhesion to B.U. was that he passionately agreed with Oswald Mosley in his dedication to peace. Both, as very young men, had fought in the first war, and both were convinced that to fight Germany again would ruin Europe and reduce Britain to impotence. Both would have been prepared to fight again if Britain were attacked; they were not pacifists, but they thought that to declare war on Germany in a quarrel that had nothing to do with England was criminal folly. War became almost certain with Chamberlain's guarantee to Poland in the spring of 1939, which gave the Poles a blank cheque. As we know now, and as Mosley foretold at the time, the cheque bounced. Henry, in his deep desire for peace, supported Mosley in every way in his campaign at that time.

When, in May 1940, Regulation 18B was revised in order that Mosley and any of his followers could be imprisoned without charge or trial, Henry was arrested; but he was speedily released.

After the war Henry wrote his huge novel about the first war, *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*. Sir Oswald Mosley appears in it as a character called Sir Hereward Birkin, and bits of his speeches are paraphrased. We saw Henry quite often when we lived in Wiltshire, and during our visits to England from France. Henry's loyalty to Mosley and his ideas never faltered. Even when he broadcast, or appeared on television, he found occasion to praise him, which was not popular. His loyalty is supposed by various contributors to Father Sewell's symposium *Henry Williamson, The Man, The Writings* to have been the reason why Henry

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never received an 'honour' of any kind. It may well be so; it may also be that he would not particularly have desired to join company with some of those who have received honours in recent times. I cannot express any opinion as to this, but I call to mind two great and admired friends of my youth, among the best writers of the age, Lytton Strachey and Evelyn Waugh. Neither of them received an honour, though I have been told that Evelyn Waugh was offered one and refused it. The Establishment, as it is called, is not everyone's idea of what is admirable or desirable, and (particularly in England) it is not much of a judge of literary merit. Meritorious writers are sometimes rewarded, but the whole thing is as chancy as a game of poker. Henry Williamson has enthusiastic admirers young enough to be his grandchildren; this is the accolade writers desire.