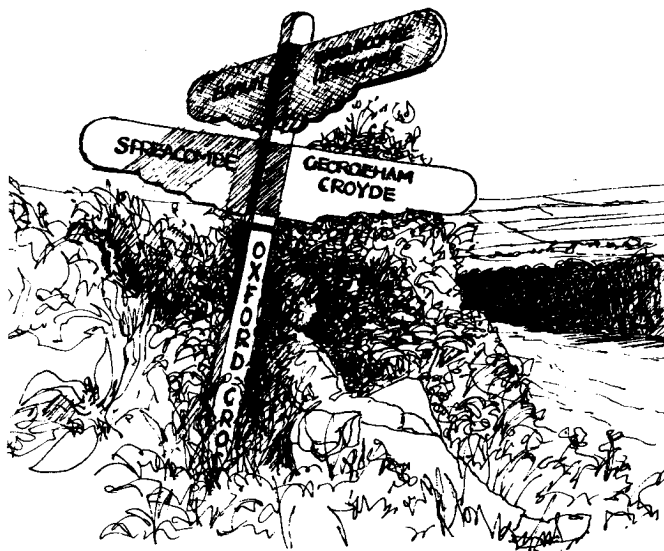


A FIRST MEETING WITH HENRY WILLIAMSON

John Gregory

What follows was written on Easter Monday, 1968, while I was sitting at the foot of the signpost at Ox's Cross. It has not been revised, and remains therefore an immediate record of my first meeting with Henry Williamson. I was fortunate enough to meet him several times afterwards, and produced with his blessing a pamphlet in which I had collected his Weekly Dispatch articles. This was limited to the grand total of seven numbered copies, and H.W. said of it: "Thank you so much for the brave little book. It is strange for me to re-enter the lost (alas) past - the first thing which appeared in the W. Dispatch was on Parkin. The Editor said, Here's a star. The star fell some months later!" Encouraged by this reception I then embarked on collecting the articles which he'd written for the Eastern Daily Press, again with his permission. However, when this was finished, he regretfully withdrew his permission on the advice of his literary trustees. I still hope that one day this collection may be published. Throughout the period that I knew him, he was always courteous, patient and kind, with a gentle sense of fun; and this will be the impression I will always remember - whatever I read to the contrary.

As I was writing on that Easter Monday, Henry was working in the wood opposite his field. He saw me, and walked over. I explained that I had come up here for inspiration. "And I'm here for perspiration," he laughed, and returned to the wood, stripping off his shirt.



Good Friday 1968

I had been taking photographs in Georgeham from the church tower, and was now walking for the first time up the long hill to Oxford Cross. A car stopped by me, and a fair-haired woman leaned across and asked me if I wanted a lift to the top of the hill. I declined, not wanting to spoil the magic of the day, and carried on walking up the sunken lane. The high banks on either side sheltered it from the wind, and the sun was hot. I reached a cross-roads, and there was a sign-post with OXFORD CROSS lettered on it in black. I was there! I walked over to a weathered palisade gate, and looked through to see a dark-green estate car parked a little way up, and beyond that a field. I wanted to see more, but hadn't the courage to open the gate. Instead, I followed the road skirting the edge of the field, which was hidden from view by the high bank, and trees beyond. I came across another entrance, and there, parked by the open rear gate, was the very car whose owner had offered a lift a few minutes earlier. Damn! Had I accepted, I might have been able to obtain permission to view the field. I stood there for three or four minutes, wondering what to do. There appeared to be nobody around, and so, feeling very nervous, I crept in. The short driveway had tall trees on either side. I stopped as it opened out into the field, and looked around. I had waited a long time for this moment; I had seen photographs of it in *The Linhay on the Downs*, which described the building of the wooden writing hut in the field which the success of *Tarka* had bought. On my left was a building which looked like a garage; on the right I could see a green caravan through the trees, and ahead, the long grass of the open field, swaying in the cold wind. Birds were singing, everything was perfect. Now, where was the hut?

I stopped suddenly: there, not 25 yards away, lay a white-haired figure, clad only in a pair of brown trousers and shoes. My heart sank. I had heard that Henry Williamson, for it was he, did not take kindly to strangers trespassing on his field. I started to turn around, cautiously, but I must have made a slight noise, for when I had one last look, he was sitting up looking at me, a hand shading his eyes. I walked slowly towards him, feeling very much the schoolboy caught in the act.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, sir. I just came to look at your field." It seemed a very inadequate explanation!

"Not at all," he replied courteously. And then, suspiciously, "How many of you are there?"

He relaxed when I told him that there was only me, and invited me to sit down. This I did, and he lay down again on a faded grey cape.

"I'm sunbathing," he said suddenly, "it does you good to get the sun on your body after a long period of writing." He showed no sign of being aware of the cold wind which was sweeping across the field. Seeing the book which I had carried with me from the village, he asked what it was, and smiled when I showed him the rather battered copy of *Goodbye West Country*.

I finished the last book of the *Chronicle* three weeks ago," he said. "I've done nothing since. For days afterwards I walked about in a daze, absolutely drained." I asked when it would be published, and what its title would be. "This autumn, I hope, but I don't know; Macdonalds have been taken over, you know. Yes, that's why *Lucifer* was so neglected. It got no publicity, because everything was in such a mess with the take-over. I haven't decided what to call it yet. Just Number Fifteen."

He mentioned his farming days, and I told him that I had been at school at Holt, which was close to Stiffkey. "Oh yes, I know it. It's a good school. Ben Britten used to go there."

"That's right, but he ran away," I said jokingly.

He grew serious. "Men of genius are seldom happy at school. They're individuals, out on their own. Why, I have a cousin who was at Marlborough. When he was sixteen he went to the headmaster and told him that he wasn't coming back. Half way through October his father asked why he wasn't at school, and when he'd heard what his son had done, threw him out of the house. He worked his passage to Australia and went into the property business there and in New Zealand. Then he came back..."

"It sounds like Francis Chichester," I interrupted.

He smiled. "You've guessed it."

"But I didn't know he was your cousin."

"Oh yes. by marriage."

He looked at his watch, and said that he was expecting his son later on. "Would you like to stay for tea?" He seemed to take my acceptance for granted, and carried on talking about the *Chronicle*, saying that he considered *The Dark Lantern* and the one he had just finished to be the best of the series, because they were both pure novels, produced entirely out of the imagination.

He sat up, put his shirt on, and said "Let's have some tea." We both stood, and he picked up the grey cloak. It was long and faded. "German Afrika Corps," he explained. "I had several once, they were given to me. But this is the only one left now. Superb material, feel it, it's still good after twenty-five years." He flung it around his shoulders. There was a very long belt hanging from the collar, which he wrapped around his waist and fastened. "There, you see!" He showed how it was lying loosely over his shoulders, but held securely by the belt, and smiled with satisfaction at remembering the correct way of wearing it. He took it off, and we walked towards the small wooden hut which stood in a corner of the field. It was dark inside, and cold out of the sun. There was a brick fireplace in the far corner, and we went out to collect some dead beech twigs from behind the hut, breaking them to size. I put mine in the large wicker basket which was underneath the work-table, while his were carefully arranged in the fireplace. I had read of the Williamson method of lighting a wood fire with just one match, and watched with interest. But much to his disgust he had to use five, and a piece of bitumen roofing!

A large kettle, black with soot and age, hung above the fire, which was now blazing strongly. I was invited to sit down on the bed, which had been pushed against the wall of the hut, and where, I was informed, T.E. Lawrence had once slept. Two cups were produced, and some cake discovered, after a search in several tins. I was warned against dropping crumbs, as they brought in the mice which would then eat his books: he held up a copy of *Tales of a Devon Village*, which had been much gnawed. "Rats," he said with a quick smile. The kettle boiled over, and was lifted off its hook with a long iron bar.

"Where are you staying?" he asked, while filling the teapot.

"Camping at Saunton, in the Lobb Fields."

"Yes, it's very nice there. I had several small tents once, but I lent them to people, and they were never returned, you know."

We drank our tea, and discussed books.

"Have you read any Shelley, or Francis Thompson?" he asked.

"Only a few of their poems."

"What! Haven't you read any of their prose? It's magnificent."

I confessed that I had not.

"Not even Francis Thompson's essay on Shelley?" he persisted. He got up and looked through the bookcase over the bed. "No, I haven't got it here. How about John Cowper Powys?"

No again.

"He died about three weeks ago, one of the most under-rated and finest writers in the country. He was a genius, but the critics ignored him. They go for people like Iris Murdoch, all the modern stuff."

I asked him if he had read *The Big Push* by Brian Gardner, a book I had read recently about the Battle of the Somme.

"That young cock sparrow! He's only thirty odd, wasn't even born when the war was on, doesn't know anything about it. He's read a few books on the subject, and thinks that he can write one too!"

The teacups were refilled, and he began to tell me about his new novel, 'Number Fifteen'. I sat silent, enchanted, listening to his quiet voice unfold the story of Phillip Maddison in this last book of *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*: of his blindness, and eventual recovery when struck by lightning during the terrific storm that is the climax of the book; the floods; the sudden clarity of vision that Phillip experiences, and the final moment when he sits down and starts to write - the *Chronicle*. That's the end." We were both quiet, and he sat down again, tired. I was amazed to see that he had been speaking for over an hour, without pause, and that it was nearly five o'clock.

Two or three minutes more passed, and the spell quietly faded. He told me that his son would be arriving soon, and that he had some work to do, so would I mind...? I started picking up my things, camera, W.D. surplus haversack, and the book. As he saw this, he said "I'm sorry, I don't sign books, I'm afraid. I tell you what I'll do: I'll initial it." And he found a blue felt-tipped pen and wrote "H.W. Hut. Good Friday 1968."

"By the way," he asked suddenly, "what's your name?" I told him. It hadn't seemed necessary before, we had both been perfectly at ease with each other anyway. We shook hands, and then, standing in the doorway of the hut, he came to attention and saluted. "Goodbye, Gregory!" And laughed. He seemed very young at that moment. I asked if he would mind if I took a photograph of him. "Not at all! Where do you want me?" He stood by the hut, looking shyly into the camera, then waved, said Goodbye again, and turned back into the hut. I walked through the palisade gate, and ran back down the hill to Georgeham.

Easter Monday, 1968