REMEMBERING HENRY WILLIAMSON

Guy Priest

I FIRST SAW HENRY WILLIAMSON in Georgeham in the summer of 1933, at the King's Arms Inn - the 'Lower House', as he named it in *The Village Book*. I had come to North Devon for one week of my summer holidays, hoping to find for myself the locations and scenes described in his books, which I had bought and read during previous years.

Having identified 'Ham' as Georgeham, and studied the map forming the end-paper to *The Labouring Life*, I had written to 'Albert Gammon', landlord of the 'Higher House', asking if he could offer me accommodation. In reply, I received a letter from Albert Jeffrey, headed 'The Rock House, Georgeham', in which he stated that he did not take visitors at the inn, but that his married daughter would be glad to provide me with bread and board. So now I was staying at Kennelfield and spending my days exploring the village and surrounding countryside.

My journey from London by motorcycle had been most pleasant, following the broad highway to the West Country. Finally my approach to Georgeham was by a sunken lane, a turning off the Barnstaple-Ilfracombe high road just beyond 'the largest village in England', Braunton. The lane ascended steeply in a winding course between banks topped with furze and thorns, then presently levelled out on the high ground above. Here, through a gap by a field gate, I caught a glimpse of a broad panorama away and below of rolling fields and downland, sloping to a wide expanse of sands and the sea. I stopped my machine and leaned for a while on the gate, taking in the scene: the Braunton Great Field, Saunton Burrows and the estuary of the Tor and the Torridge, the 'Two Rivers', an enchanted land. Presently, my mind filled with thoughts of Willie Maddison and Mary Ogilvie, I remounted my machine and continued my journey to the village.

During succeeding days I climbed the church tower; inspected Skirr Cottage; talked to villagers at the two inns over pints of yellow scrumpy cider, and followed field-path and sunken lane to Putsborough Sands and Baggy Point. I also followed the road north of the village as it wound its way up to Oxford - or 'Windwhistle' - Cross, there to discover the field and the writing hut which has featured so prominently in the author's life for almost half a century. (The padlocked gates indicated his absence, and I found my way over the hedge-bank for a sneak view.)

Later, in a conversation with Charlie Ovey, proprietor and publican of the Lower House, I had learned that HW was expected to call at the inn for supper that evening, my last in the village. So here I now was, courtesy of Charlie, waiting in the bar after closing time, hoping for a glimpse of the writer whose work I had come to admire more than that of any other 'prose stylist in contemporary English letters'.*

*HW of J.B. Priestley

Presently there came a knock at the outer door, which the landlord opened to admit two men and a woman. After an exchange of greeting, the newcomers made their way along the passage towards the parlour where Mrs Ovey was preparing supper. As they passed the open doorway to the bar, the second man, tall and dark with a small moustache, brown eyes and very white, regular teeth, caught my eye and smiled; and I recognised the likeness from the photograph hanging on the wall behind the bar counter, near the two badger masks snarling in death, and the churchwarden pipe. Neither of us spoke, but I fancied there was a look of acknowledgment, even of recognition, in his glance. Next moment he had followed his companions and disappeared. I heard the sound of jovial voices and laughter from the parlour. Then a door closed, and the moment passed. Once again I was alone. After a pause, I let myself out into the street and walked away in the starry darkness, to be thrilled by the sight of a white owl fanning silently above the summer grasses of the glebe field.

Thereafter, for me life took on a new reality. I had actually seen the author of *Tarka*, and like many another young writer before and since, I felt an increased awareness and affinity with him through his work.

When I returned to London I wrote a long article entitled *Ham St George and the Williamson Country*, describing my recent pilgrimage and identifying people and places from the novels and village books. This I posted off to Shallowford, Filleigh, where I had learned HW was then living, with a covering letter expressing my enthusiasm and admiration for his writings; after which, hopefully, I awaited a reply.

In due course it came, typewritten, undated, without a heading; nevertheless it was a personal contact. HW had recognised me. I was no longer alone!

In this, the first of many letters I was to receive from him over the years, Henry wrote:

> *Thank you for letting me see the enclosed. I regret this must be short, as I have about 98 letters to answer also, and no secretary. I think you should try and see things with your own eyes. I fear I am not interesting enough to the general public for your Ham article to be acceptable. I cant even get mine accepted. If I were Hardy and had just died, then you might sell a similar reminisence* (sic) *article; not otherwise. But dont abandon hope; see things for yourself and write of them; and then prepare to cross the literary Sahara with only a doubtful mirage to reward you.*

I showed this to my father, a journalist in Cambridge, who expressed the thought that Henry was politely telling me not to crib from his works. But I read the letter as friendly encouragement, as I believe it was intended. Particularly that concluding sentence, which was incised on my mind, to be repeated many times in subsequent years almost as a catechism of faith when my unsolicited writings were repeatedly rejected by editor after editor.

At this time I was working in London and travelling to my home in Cambridge at weekends. Most of my spare time, when not working on my motor-cycle, was spent walking in the meadows and woods around Grantchester, reached by a field-path from our house in the suburb of Newnham. These walks, many of them solitary, but some in company with a naturalist friend, provided material for nature articles and poems which I hoped would one day be published. My writing was much influenced by the work of several writers in addition to H.W. These included Richard Jefferies, W.H. Hudson and Edward Thomas, all of whom I admired. At the time I was paying fees to a literary agency in London (curiously named the Cambridge Literary Agency) to submit my work to editors in the belief that they enjoyed special inside contacts which would ensure my success. In fact, they didn't sell a single manuscript of mine but continued to pocket the fees.

One Saturday I was surprised and delighted when my father informed me that an old journalist friend of his, whom he had chanced to meet recently, had told him that he knew Henry Williamson from years ago in Fleet Street. When my father told his friend, Mr 'Bim' Hodder, of my literary aspirations and contact with H.W., Mr Hodder offered to write a letter of introduction to his old colleague for me to take to Devon, where I again planned to spend my summer holiday. So when I set off for Georgeham a few weeks later I carried with me this personal note to H.W. Prior to this, in the spring, I had sent him some poems and other material, hoping for comment, and mentioned my father's friend. On June 8th Henry wrote:

> *Thank you very much for your letter and manuscripts. I have not replied before, but I have only just returned from America.*
>
> *I have read the poems and the Phantasy you have been kind enough to send me, and realise that you appear to have exactly the same emotions and feelings that I had when I was beginning to write. Almost all my thoughts and feelings were centred around Jefferies. This was perhaps a natural thing in the circumstances of strain and isolation through which I was living after the war. But from the point of view of writing, what I did then was only 'prentice work. Time brought a maturity, when I began to see things beyond, as it were, the awakening that the writer Jefferies had given me. Writers who have gone through the prentice stage know that composition is damned hard work, and done in spite of enormous difficulties and with hopes to God that the stuff will be all right, i.e. will put out a hook and hold the reader to the end.*
>
> *I hope this is not an incoherent letter, but its purpose is to indicate to you that you have the feelings and sensibilities of a writer: the way is open to you, and it is strewn, or will be strewn with discards; each phase of which brings one to that bedrock of self whence comes original writing.*
>
> *With best wishes,*
>
> *Henry Williamson.*
>
> *P.S. Do remember me to the Hodders, whom I hope I shall see again before very long. Terribly busy now at the moment.*

He was in fact working on the last part of *The Linhay on the Downs*, to be published by Jonathan Cape later that year.

When I arrived in Georgeham I again stayed at the bungalow called Kennelfield, overlooking the erstwhile kennels of an earlier squire's foxhounds, as related in *The Village Book*. Then one afternoon, after some hesitation, I made my way up the hill to Windwhistle Cross. Finding the gate open, I followed the curving driveway towards a group of people near a wooden building on the far side of the field. There were several children, I noticed, and as they caught sight of me someone, whom I judge to be Mrs Williamson, came towards me. She was slim, dark-haired, and with a complexion so naturally brown that I immediately perceived why, to her family and friends, Ida Loetitia Williamson, nee Hibbert, was known as 'Gipsy'.

I apologised for the intrusion, nervously handed her my letter of introduction, and asked if I might please see Mr Williamson for a few moments. With a tolerant smile, tinged with the resignation of one to whom this request was all too familiar, Mrs Williamson took the proffered envelope and said she would go and see. Would I care to wait just a few moments, please?

While she was gone I spoke to the children playing round a small green Eccles caravan, then admired the view over many fields and woods to the distant estuary. I recalled this from my unauthorised exploration of the field during the previous summer, described in my reminiscence article. I noted again the writing-hut, of rough weatherboard with tiled roof and running fox weather-vane, in the ssouth-west corner. The larger building on the east side of the field turned out to be a garage and workshop with loft above, from which presently there emerged a remembered figure in fisherman's jersey, corduroys and moccasins.

'How are you?' H.W.'s greeting was diffident as he studied me through half-closed eyes. My outstretched hand was touched in acknowledgment, but he declined to grasp it. Henry flinched away from physical contact. 'It's good of you to come,' he said, after hesitation, and though I didn't realise it then, he told me afterwards he dreaded meeting strangers. Too often they had nothing to give, and sapped his nervous energy, already depleted. I can appreciate this now (he said I would one day) and can see that what I was seeking was the original of the personality in the books - the friendly, knowledgeable, sympathetic countryman who would recognise me as a kindred spirit. Instead, he was reserved and withdrawn, speaking very little, and then in the quietly modulated tone I was later to recognise and appreciate on the radio.

I can't recall how long I stayed. I think Henry was engaged on some job in the workshop and I believe I lent a hand. Then Gipsy prepared tea of boiled eggs and lettuce and I was invited to join them. We all climbed up into the loft for the meal. This was reached by way of a vertical wooden ladder, like clambering up the companionway on board ship: quite a tortuous manoeuvre if one were carrying packages, as I was later to discover. The loft had a low ceiling under the slope of the roof, with windows low down in the shallow walls. The floor was

of oak planks, salvaged from an old manor house, I was told.

After the meal Henry and I walked down to the village, each carrying a galvanised can for drinking water, there being no supply in the field, only storm-water butts. A well had been sunk in the north-east corner leading into Spreycombe Lane, but it had failed to reach the spring a water diviner had said existed there. I believe the shaft was some thirty feet deep, at which point lack of oxygen had prevented the diggers going any further. So all drinking water had to be carried up the long hill from a spring just north of the village. Henry said he had to see a joiner about some work to be carried out in the garage, the joiner being Lionel Jeffrey, son of the landlord of the Higher House. During our visit we also called on Arty 'Brooking' Thomas at the village store and post office, where I was introduced to that colourful character of *The Village Book*. I recall I was immensely proud to be in company with the author among some of his 'characters'.

At the Higher House we drank scrumpy cider (apple vinegar, Henry called it, 'Rots the guts!') then retraced our steps up the hill, picking up the filled water cans left by the roadside. (Today, they would probably have been stolen in our absence!)

Later, as I walked back to my lodgings, I was floating on air; partly due to the potency of the cider, but also to the fact that I had met and talked with my admired author - even seemingly to have been accepted as a potential friend.

When I returned to London I composed a poem describing the village and the North Devon countryside, sending a copy to H.W. in the hope it might receive his approval. Shortly afterwards a postcard arrived, bearing a photograph of the King's Arms inn with petrol pump in foreground. On the other side Henry thanked me for my poem, saying:

> *It certainly has the spirit and letter of Georgeham and the fields and the lanes. I am giving it to Ovey who wants to put it on the wall of the bar with his other treasures.*

At this time I was living in a basement room in London's Holland Park area and spending most weekends in the country, either at Cambridge, or near Wootton Bassett in Wiltshire, where my girl friend lived with her parents in a cottage under the downs. I had recently taken up sketching, and during that autumn I copied a head and shoulders portrait of Richard Jefferies from my copy of *Field and Hedgerow*. I also produced a similar pencil sketch of H.W. from the photograph on the flyleaf of *The Linhay on the Downs*. This sketch I framed, adding the signature from Henry's second letter to me, and presented it to an aunt, an admirer of H.W.'s writings. The portrait of Jefferies I dispatched to Henry in December, and his reply, handwritten, reached me shortly afterwards:

Dear Guy Priest,

Only immense pressure of mail & post has prevented my

writing before to thank you for the kind gift of R.J.'s portrait for Christmas. I never saw the resemblance between Jefferies and yourself before but you have the same type of head. How goes the writing? Its a hard job but worth it I think.

Best wishes, H.W.

The comparison between Jefferies and myself surprised and flattered me, and I resolved to carry on plugging away with my writing in spite of a total lack of success and a growing pile of rejection slips. (I consoled myself with the thought that Jack London was reputed to have collected a spike of rejections four feet high, and had indeed papered the walls of his room with them!)

In the spring of 1935 a new weekly newspaper, *The Cambridge Standard*, commenced publication in my home town. The editor, who lived in Grantchester, was an old friend of my father, and he agreed to publish (without payment) a weekly column of nature notes from my pen. The newspaper was short of capital, having been launched on a shoestring, consequently there was a lack of cash; later they hoped to be able to pay for freelance contributions. I wasn't too worried about payment; at least I now had an outlet for my work. On March 29th 1935, *A Salute to Spring* by Guy Priest was duly published!

I still recall my excitement and satisfaction on seeing my first stuff in print. This was reward beyond mere gold, or, anyway, coin of the realm!

After that, each week I eagerly awaited the thud on the mat on Friday as my copy of the paper reached my basement room in London; and my escape to the countryside by motor cycle on the following afternoon now had an added enjoyment and sense of purpose. I welcomed the discipline of providing 750 words each Wednesday, from notes made in Grantchester or elsewhere during the previous weekend.

The Cambridge Standard lasted for just over a year, and during that time I contributed my article each week, my style much influenced by H.W. and Richard Jefferies. Naturally, I had to tell Henry of my progress, and in April he sent me a postcard. (Unbeknown to me, at that time he was absorbed in the writing of *Salar the Salmon.*)

200 letters a month; fatigue, overworked already, only one defective head, heart and body. Even business letters unanswered 3-4 months. Glad you've got yourself published but become yourself and no one else & go as easy as you can, the easier the better.

Best wishes, H.W.

P.S. 'Nature stuff' should not be "thriller", but it should be "thrilling".

This latter comment was in response to my complaint that editors seemed to accept only 'thriller' contributuons for their pages; a reference to magazine rejections of my nature stories.

In June that year my column paid an imaginary visit to Exmoor, utilising notes I had made the previous summer when I had visited the moor in search of the red deer. Like that of many a visitor before and since, my quest proved to be largely in vain; though I did in fact catch a glimpse of a few hinds departing over the skyline near badgery Water. But my story was mostly imaginary.

Coincidentally, at that time the paper was printing a short series of articles on field sports, notably otter hunting and badger digging, contributed by a Mr H.J.F. Stewart. In his introduction to this distinguished contributor, the editor credited him with being an ex-Master of Otterhounds. It so happened that I met Mr Stewart, who was then living in Cambridge, and he told me that he had known Henry years before in Devon, and that he had been a member of the Cheriton Otter Hounds when Henry was writing *Tarka* and some of the other nature stories.

When my piece of Exmoor fiction was published, I sent a copy to Henry, together with Stewart's articles on otter and badger. Although deeply immersed in *Salar*, Henry took time out to send me a long letter in reply:

Filleigh
21 June

Dear Priest,

The weekly exercise in the Cambridge Standard should be good, like all exercise, to remove waste products from the system. It takes time to reassure oneself, I suppose, to write what actually did happen, rather than a formal composition. A man goes to Exmoor to see red deer; he searches one hill, then rests, watches through glasses, sees nothing, traipses on a few miles, sees nothing, and spends the afternoon on his back drowsing deliciously. When he writes it, he puts in all he had hoped to see, in Landseer prose. Whereas if he had said that he got tired, or lazy, and lay down, and watched a spider, and what the spider did, and no deer, and then drank too much beer in the evening and felt muddled and wrote his Landseer picture therefrom, this would be interesting, because it would be recognisable from common experience.

The otter sketch was amusing. I seem to have seen it before, in 1922, in Stewart's rooms in Ilfracombe. It is interesting to know that since leaving this country he has been promoted to ex-mastership of the Cheriton Otter Hounds. He was whipper-in in 1913 and Hon Sec from 1919-1924; and during that badger dig, when I ventured to tell him I had written a story called Bill Brock in Pearson's, I remember his furious denunciation and the shout of 'It was utter, utter BALLS', which even the strong wind did not carry away, so that those by the sett below looked up and all the terriers, hearing it, renewed their howling. A most interesting character, with a really colossal collection of skulls of badgers, cats, foxes, otters, besides other bones; he shall have a page in my autobiography.

Do not be put out if we do not meet later in the summer. My

hilltop is, or should be, a place of solitary relaxation. Apart from written work, there is so little left to give to other human beings that they are inevitably disappointed: many have told me so: others have written it. Perhaps it is because they acquire a secondary enthusiasm about things from the written word, and expect to find personally, the primary enthusiasm: whereas the natural or biological process is that after any strenuous and sustained mental activity, the interest exhausts itself. People could never understand that with T.E. Lawrence; and insisting that he was different from other people, they, quite unconsciously, caused him a deep mortification and a permanent dread of what might be said to him, at any moment, by any person. Headlights in the eyes all the time: and so seldom the star-ray of truthful understanding, one human being to another.

I am spending days and nights and weeks and months of malaise and liver-tearings: and only hope the result isnt as awful to read as it is to write. You have chosen the same road; your own feet will carry you: 'in the end we are all self-contained'. Does this appal you? Good luck.

HW

You are in a secondary stage of learning to write: the third will soon materialise: and then you will earn some money. But you must keep on, and dont fear to be low-brow.

My first reaction to this helpful and sympathetic advice was a feeling of disappointment that my weekly hard labour for the *Standard* should be regarded as an exercise 'to remove waste products'. It was, of of course, largely that, as I later came to appreciate. But at the time I regarded my 'jewelled prose' to be of high merit, and certainly superior to the mundane reporting which comprised much of the newspaper's contents. In fact, my writing was largely derivative and precious, and reading through those contributions forty years later, I am amazed that I was unaware how stilted and unpractised my writing actually was. But one does not become accomplished in a craft or calling merely by taking thought. To become a writer one must work and work and then throw away the results and try again. I couldn't bear to throw anything away.

In thanking H.W. for his letter, I expressed indignation that the writer of the otter and badger articles should be masquerading under a false identity, and suggested that next time I saw Mr Stewart I tax him with the position. This brought another letter from Henry:

Dont you think it might be best not to mention, to anyone, and certainly not to the editor or to the man himself, about that mistake of mastership? It could do no good; only harm. Poor S., he would be embarrassed; and there's no virtue in embarrassing any fellow man.

Yes, let's meet, if we happen to be about at the same time, at Ovey's. I dont feel the field is a good place, for reasons stated. In summer from 2 to 3 hundred people try to find me; I try not to hurt their feelings; but its misery for one who wants to be alone, to recharge nervous energy after losing it in

imaginative work. You'll understand.

Yrs, HW

Yes, you'll have to write a lot of stuff out of your system; as I had to write Jefferies out of mine, in Lone Swallows and elsewhere. I understand about need for friendship, too; but in my experience friendships based on literary likings arent any good good; like marriages based so. Artificial; things done by hands a much sounder base. I wish I had your interest in birds: mine seems gone forever, written away. One cant have one's cake both ways.

On reflection, I took no further action in the matter of mastership, and never mentioned it to anyone again; so to this day, I don't know the truth of the matter - though in my copy of Baily's *Hunting Directory 1927-28*, the master of the Cheriton is listed (1924) as W.H. Rogers, Esq., to whom, of course, Henry dedicated *Tarka the Otter.*

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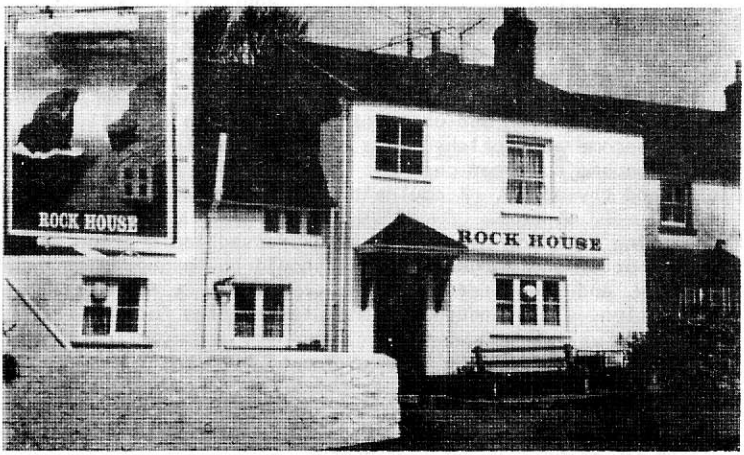

(Photograph by Peter Rothwell)