

Secretary's Notes

THE NORFOLK WEEKEND, MAY 1981

THE VISIT TO OLD HALL FARM has been described most excellently in the reprint of Bernard Phillips' article. It was David Cobham who alerted Bernard to the farm visit after most generously agreeing to; the loan of his own precious copy of the film *The Vanishing Hedgerows*, thus ensuring a successful start to the evening programme. At their delightful home a few miles from Blakeney where I had gone to collect the film, David Cobham and his wife Janet explained how the film came to be made.

Although his early career had been in writing and directing documentary films for industry, a lifelong interest in wildlife and the countryside led eventually to David making the film *Goshawk* for the BBC. Its success led to other feature films on birds and animals, until David and his wife one day realised that the survival of many endangered species demanded more than protective legislation which could prove useless if, as is still the case, their habitat was being destroyed. By chance they read Williamson's memoir *The Green Desert* published in *The Daily Telegraph Magazine** in 1969, which discussed this very problem. A tentative letter soon led to their meeting and a decision to collaborate on a documentary film showing the effects being wrought upon the established countryside in the interests of large-scale mechanised farming. Henry was to write the script, narrate the film and appear on screen, and use the old Norfolk farm as the major location.

On the envelope of a letter to David Cobham is a large balloon encircling the words, 'Where have all my hedgerows gone?' And so to the film that we watched - *The Vanishing Hedgerows*. The implication of the title soon became clear when, as Henry put it, 'Hedgerows, you see, are nature's motorways, where the little animals and birds trace their own patterns across the countryside.' And he showed that they are the refuges and breeding-grounds for a multitude of wildlife. Every hedge grubbed up means another homeless host largely doomed unless it can squeeze into some probably overcrowded alternative sanctuary. Shown too was the often toxic effects caused by many herbicides and pesticides, destroying or at least damaging the food chain from insect to hawk, rabbit to stoat, leading to death, starvation or infertility. But the film is not just a plea for wildlife and its habitat, but to Man to understand and nurture, before he destroys it irrevocably, his greatest asset - the earth. Without the windbreaks of trees and hedge a topsoil too frequently used today as a repository for the artificials of inorganic farming, can become dusty and light through lack of humus and disappear in the dust storms already known in East Anglia and elsewhere; and end as easily in the lifeless dustbowls created by greed in the Middle West of America. Williamson's plea is for a return to the

*Photographs illustrating this article are available. See HWS Journal 3.

traditional methods, the organic farming which he practised and which raised a near derelict farm from the slough. As he said: 'Some still talk of the soil as Mother...Erda, the Earth Goddess, Mother Earth. We must have respect for our topsoil.'

But, as the film also showed, this battle of reclamation on the Norfolk farm had another meaning for Williamson: it was his gesture of support for a man he admired in his aim to create a new strength and earned self-respect amongst the British people, most especially through a return to, and regeneration of, the land. This support for Oswald Mosley caused problems and misunderstandings - and he was still alive when the film was made. But despite some old hard memories, Williamson declared himself still an optimist; that Man would reverse his pillage of the land and, as the film concluded, once more return to the old commandment: 'Live as though you might die tomorrow. But farm your land as though you will live for ever.'

The lights came up to a long reflective silence before the applause, so well deserved, broke out.

I understand that the buffet preceding the final item of the evening was excellent; it certainly looked very good as I hurried past on a last errand.*

And so to Dr Wheatley Blench and his assessment of Williamson's writings and life in Norfolk, essentially *The Story of A Norfolk Farm* and the more complete story as novelised in the later books of the *Chronicle*. With mastery Dr Blench examined these works both for their literary quality and for the reasons for the farming venture which were more complex than merely a desire for hard manual work. Appropriate extracts were read. As Williamson was intensely aware, the fortunes and misfortunes that befell one family unit largely through a period of great trial for Britain and her people were but a microcosmic reflection of a travail that engulfed first Europe and later almost the whole world. Beyond this were the problems brought about by his own political thinking and action which affected not only himself but also, inevitably, his family. This matter was skilfully examined by Dr Blench, and, perhaps for the first time, discussed in a context ranging far beyond the limits of British nationalism.

Later, with extracts from both Mosley's and Williamson's writings, Dr Blench illustrated the often parallel ideas and ideals propounded by both men in isolation long before they met, and how, when they did meet, Williamson placed his allegiance with Mosley. The notion that Mosley was but a lackey and mirror-image of Germany's leader, only waiting to hail the new order if war came and Britain were defeated was known by those in power to be erroneous. In that event, his loyalty would be, and was, to his country; and his followers acted likewise. Thus, with Williamson. 'When locked up, I laughed, I just showed

*Editor's note: Remember to provide picnic-box for hard-working Sec. at next function.

contempt. I had fought in the trenches in the Great War. I was no traitor. And soon they realised that and let me go.'

If any further proof were needed that Williamson's aims were other than genuinely patriotic, suggested Dr Blench, then reference to a Papal pronouncement made to the people of Italy after the war by Pope Pius XII would show his advocacy of essentially the same aims and ideals for which Williamson and others had been villified.

The paper was warmly acclaimed and especially praised by Richard Williamson, his mother, and sister Margaret Bream, who, with some old friends from Norfolk days, it was our pleasure to welcome and entertain.

And thus, with small groups quietly talking, a memorable day ended.

(NOTE: In due course it is hoped to offer the text of Dr Blench's paper an offprint via the Society's Publications Service.)

NEW BOOKS ABOUT HENRY WILLIAMSON IN PREPARATION

NEWS OF NEW BOOKS, either in preparation or projected, has been received in recent months. Whilst advance notice must be restricted to works accepted for publication, it is good to note that the following each covers a different aspect of H.W.'s life and works - no duplication of ideas - which is excellent.

First, from Daniel Farson we have this note about his book due out next spring:

At last my personal appreciation of Henry Williamson has been completed and is due to be published by Michael Joseph at the end of March next year.

It has proved extraordinarily difficult. At the beginning of this year, I decided to re-write the book from start to finish, but I hope all the effort has been worthwhile. Henry was a complex man and I realise now that no single book can tell the whole truth about him, though the definitive biography to be written by his son Richard may well come close. Henry was many men and there were many truths accordingly. I felt a deep affection for him as I wrote my book, though he was not the easiest of men, but why should he have been otherwise with such a blazing talent to fulfil? My respect for him as a writer increases. The early Chronicle books, even more than Tarka or the perfection of Dandelion Days in The Flax of Dream, convince me that he was a great writer whose full recognition is yet to come.

My book is no more than an impression, a tribute to a man I took too much for granted when he was alive. I am glad to have written it, for I understand Henry better now and admire him more.

Finally, however, I believe I have conveyed something of the essence of Henry, who was my neighbour in North Devon for twenty-five years and ultimately my friend.

Turning from biography to literary criticism, I understand from Dr Wheatley Blench that his book, a critical appreciation of the literary qualities of Henry Williamson's writings, is nearing completion, and will be published by Blackwells sometime next year.

Advance notice of other books will appear in later Journals together with reviews of books published. If you know of anything newly published or impending that the Society should promote do let either the Editor or myself know.

J.H.

THE D.H. LAWRENCE SOCIETY

I would like to thank the D.H. Lawrence Society for carrying a paragraph in their 1980 Commemorative Journal announcing the formation of the Henry Williamson Society with a few details and words of encouragement. In reciprocation, as one literary society giving help to another in making itself known and, it is hoped, increasing its membership, may I advise any of our members who are interested that ordinary membership is £2.65 (excluding one journal and a quarterly newsletter) and can be obtained from the Treasurer, Mr B Pearce-Naylor, c/o 8a Victoria Street, Eastwood, Nottingham, NG16.

Tim Osborne

THE PAPER

A few copies of *The Paper* Vol.2, No.2 for July 1981 which includes the original illustrated article reprinted in this issue of the Journal, are still available. Members wishing to obtain a copy should write to the following address enclosing the sum of 40p for each copy, postage inclusive:

Bernard and Carla Phillips,
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