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HENRY WILLIAMSON, FARMER

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MY FIRST INTRODUCTION to Henry Williamson was over thirty years ago. While still at school, I borrowed a copy of *The Story of a Norfolk Farm* with the intention of comparing it with the works of Adrian Bell who was the subject of the School Certificate examination at that time.

Immediately I realised that here was a writer who not only told a good story but had actually experienced the hard physical work of running a farm and knew what he was writing about, leaving out sentimental inconsequentialities designed to please the reader. In fact, it was true to life.

Occasionally over the next ten years or so I re-read the book which stimulated my interest in Williamson's other works. Eventually, while recuperating from a bout of mumps, I wrote to Henry Williamson telling him of my interest, mentioning particularly his farming experiences. Within a few days a reply came in his own inimitable style, telling me the likely content of future books in the *Chronicle*, with particular reference to his farming experiences in Norfolk. Within a few months I, like so many others, made my way up the hill to Ox's Cross and met Henry Williamson, not, I suppose, regarding him so much as a famous author but rather as a retired soldier and farmer who could write about his feelings and experiences in a way I could understand and appreciate.

Farmers are extremely critical of one another. Their work and efforts are on display for all to see. A poor crop, unthrifty livestock or an untidy yard cannot be hidden from view and everyone in the countryside is aware of criticism of one's neighbours and workmen.

Henry Williamson started farming during the mid 1930s at what was probably the difficult time this century. Land and labour were cheap and plentiful, but returns were almost nil. Agriculture after the war had been allowed to die for political reasons. Imported foods, low in price and quality had so depressed the home market that many farmers went bankrupt, or were carrying overdrafts and mortgages that they had little hope of repaying. The land itself was neglected, and the only way that a farmer could survive was by not spending any money, risking nothing, and hoping that better times would come before the bank foreclosed. The effects of this time are still implanted on the generation of farmers and workers that lived through it; they are extremely cautious when spending money to replace equipment or make any improvements. To the unthinking they seem mean, cold-hearted and even embittered, a gross misunderstanding on the part of the general public. It was into this atmosphere of depression that Williamson launched himself and his young family, taking on the Herculean task of restoring a neglected farm to fertility.

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Undoubtedly to be an idealist means that you are going to suffer the frustrations of working with others who are not so enthusiastic. Their ideas will not be the same as yours and this leads to misunderstanding on both sides. Yet every farmer has in his mind an ideal of how he would like his farm to be. It may take more than a lifetime to achieve the goal: vagaries of climate have control over a farmer's life and if one strives against nature, rather than with it, failure may be the only result. Williamson was an idealist. Consider Chapter 4 of *Norfolk Farm* in which he sees a rosy future when Sam would be managing the farm. Or consider Chapter 21 of *Lucifer Before Sunrise*. Whilst clearing the thorn trees, the thought of the ideal farm was still with him after six years:

> *In his optimism he imagined the park-like slopes of green grass and clover, the walnut trees he would plant, the pedigree redpoll cows grazing happily; while the old thorns he had left for beauty's sake were mantled with white blossoms in May, awaiting from Abyssinia the happy turtle-dove.* (p.321)

Such optimism is the driving force which ensures that the true farmer who loves the land and his work keeps on trying no matter what failures he experiences. The realities of a farming life, the frustrations of everyday problems and the intransigent attitude of the older farm-workers depicted in the novels are very real, and I could give similar examples from my own experiences.

The period immediately before the second world war was a time when agriculture was beginning to change. Although the farm tractor was by no means uncommon, it was still in its infancy and had changed very little from the time of its introduction some twenty years previously. Most of the machines were slow, cumbersome and heavy, and until the Ferguson tractor was introduced in 1936 very few improvements had been made. The lightweight Ferguson with its hydraulically controlled mounted equipment completely revolutionised the concept of the modern farmer.

Williamson's enthusiasm for this new machine was understandable. It was easy to manoeuvre and its small size belied the amount of work it was capable of doing. On many occasions in his writing he praises the machine, and in *The Story of A Norfolk Farm*, Chapter 34, 'Hilly Piece', he tells how he prepares the obdurate field for wheat growing. In the epigraph he goes so far as to say that without the tractor the reclamation of the farm would not have been possible. Grudging admiration for the mechanisation of the farm also comes from the wrokers. "Blast, I like that patent," mutters Bob when he sees the tractor ploughing the steep hillside, high praise from one who regarded the new farmer's ideas and ideal with inbred caution and a certain amount of distrust.

As a farmer is in close contact with his men, often working with them, it is difficult for him to remain objective: he can very easily be swayed by their opinions and if this happens he loses control of his work force, and also the goal for which he is striving. The passage in *Lucifer Before Sunrise*, chapter 9, when Phillip meets his neighbour Charles Box in the Corn Hall admirably sums up this situation. For the

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first time Phillip (Williamson) realises that his own reactions are not necessarily those of an incompetent misfit.

Probably Williamson's fault in his farming venture was that he was in too much of a hurry to achieve the results he desired. He too often did the work himself, suffering mental and physical strain when he should have employed a good workman, thus leaving himself more time to do the actual management side of the business. Unfortunately he was often so preoccupied with getting the work done that the whole venture was at times in a state of turmoil because of a lack of a sense of direction. His ideal of a family farm, with the workers sharing and co-operating in the running of the enterprise, was laudable, but forty years ago the ordinary farm worker who had suffered such hardships in the past was not ready to accept that such ideas were practical or to their advantage, and so he was to suffer the frustration of trying to put his ideas over to a workforce who were, to say the least, sceptical.

This frustration can be illustrated by many events in the novels. At times it seems as if the men are being awkward on purpose, and there is no doubt that workmen can, if they want to, make a farmer's life a misery. Perhaps Henry Williamson's real problem was that he saw both sides of any situation. Although his high ideals for the farm often brought him into conflict with others and he became intolerant of people who were slower in thought and less energetic than himself, Williamson was aware of his failure in this respect and in fact pokes fun at himself as in the Hare and the Tortoise passage in *Lucifer*.

It is very difficult for anyone who has not endured sustained physical work to realise just how exhausting this can be. To experience the boredom and drudgery of many jobs on a farm is to appreciate the feeling with which Williamson writes in *Lucifer*: "The awful monotony of life on a tractor, even on a spring day. And spring time, what was it but battle time? The battlefield seemed so huge, beyond all reckoning; the area to be ploughed seems so big, the machine so slow."

Often the reality of agriculture is far removed from the vision of farming for many urban dwellers. Their knowledge is often based on nursery picture-books, or trendy self-sufficiency programmes put out by the press, radio or television. Because of this, they often have preconceived ideas about farming and the countryside. In the second chapter of *Lucifer* Williamson writes what I think is one of the most perceptive pieces that has ever been written about farming and how it affects the farmer. Only a man who was a true farmer would have written those paragraphs, and it took someone of Henry's talent to put it down on paper; but it is unfortunately difficult for anyone not connected with agriculture to realise the mental anguish that a farmer sustains at times.

Many people may consider the episode in Norfolk a failure during Williamson's life, but I do not believe this to be true. Not only did he restore a small part of England to fertility, thus proving to himself and others that this was possible, he somehow found time to bring together much of the material that was to form the basis of the Ancient

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Sunlight series. This was done at great cost to himself and undoubtedly put great strain on those around him.

Often he condemned himself for having undertaken the task, as he was self-critical; but by giving up the farm when he did, it gave him the opportunity to return to writing. Anybody who leaves the land in a better state than when he started farming has been a success and is worthy of admiration for having undertaken the venture.

Propertius, born circa 51 B.C., sums up the situation:

> *Quod si deficiant vires, audacia certe laus erit: in magnis et voluisse sat est.* Elegies II.

Members requiring a translation are asked to apply to Ben. Ed.