Book Review

HENRY - An appreciation of Henry Williamson by Daniel Farson.
Michael Joseph. 239 pp., 20 photos. £8.95. (Publication 7 June 1982)

The trouble with Henry Williamson was that he upset too many people with his beliefs and in personal relationships for him to receive during his lifetime the rewards he truly deserved as a writer of the first rank. In this new book are a number of examples of the 'human problem' caused by a quirky and often difficult nature. One example will suffice.

Many of those who have read *The Gale of The World* (1969), fifteenth and ultimate novel in the sequence *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*, will have recognised in the character of the American journalist and writer, Osgood Nilsson, who when in drink became loud-mouthed, boorish and cruelly abusive, an exaggerated portrait of the author's father, Negley Farson. Here the better part of two chapters are devoted to the often difficult relationship that existed between Williamson and Farson senior, who lived in close proximity in North Devon for many years, the results of which long survived the latter's death in 1960. If in life the steamrollering Farson metaphorically flattened the English writer with his merciless tirades, sometimes in public or in front of friends, after his death Williamson assuaged his humiliation through the written word. That he had cause is not denied by Daniel Farson, who from his teens also knew Williamson; but he in turn was angered but what he felt was a petty and bitter revenge, and so for a time another friendship was soured, even though Williamson took pains to point out that his character of Nilsson had many redeeming features.

That the rift with Daniel Farson was healed is clear, or this book might hardly have been written. So what sort of book is this, and what does it attempt? In the Introduction we learn that it is not a definitive biography, a purely literary assessment, or a lurid expose in the current vogue, but, as we may have expected from the title, "It is an apology for failing to recognise his true value while he was alive; a personal appreciation to compensate". Any who might cynically consider that this book is merely a belated apologia should reflect on how a too frequent and close contact with a person rarely reveals more than the small and petty doings of daily life, and to establish a wider view and deeper understanding often needs a distancing from the subject in time or space.

The book is in two parts. The first provides a synopsis of Williamson's life to early middle age, examining in particular the major factors in childhood and youth that formed his adult mentality, and; which so affected his thoughts and relationships thereafter. The child, disprized of a father's love, became the sensitive youth, with the simple innocence of an age now so remote as to be almost incomprehensible, flung into the terror of a war that as it progressed became more terrible in its mindless attrition than any before or since. In such

circumstances it is hardly surprising that the young soldier grasped at the lifebelt of the famous Christmas Truce of 1914, which revealed to him the shattering fact that both sides believed they were fighting for the same cause. Without this thought to buoy him up, and the powerful camaraderie and loyalties of the battlefield that provided a form of stability in Chaos, he might well have gone mad.

When it was done, and his destiny as a writer almost decided, a rift at home sent him back to the North Devon of boyhood holidays. The years of toil that followed led at last to success and recognition with *Tarka*, that ruefully had to be set beside the comparative failure of the redemptory four-novel sequence *The Flax of Dream.* His first marriage to a serene and beautiful girl that did not quench a lifelong search for the soul-maiden of his dreams, a growing political awareness, and evenetual move to a derelict Norfolk farm before the war, is all recorded with comment from some who knew him during those years.

Also discussed is the forever vexed matter of the right wing political affiliation declared in the 1930s, with his praise for Hitler and friendship for Oswald Mosley that have hung like a dark cloud over his reputation ever since. Not only did this ensure an immediate literary ostracism by the predominantly left wing literati of the time, carried on by many others since, it also untimately cost him the honours many felt he rightly deserved. It was indeed an irony, as Daniel Farson points out, that for his beliefs alone, which in no way affected his loyalty to his country, he was made a pariah, while in July 1980 the Fellows of the British Academy voted overwhelmingly against the expulsion of Anthony Blunt.

Divorced, and the farm sold, Williamson returned to Devon after the last war to begin a new life and start the magnum opus that took until a few years before his death to complete. It is this period when the author came to know Williamson that is dealt with in the latter part of the book, and once again the question of relationships predominates. A second marriage ended, like the first, in failure, although separation led not to bitterness but to an understanding that survived until the end. To his credit Williamson was quite aware that the greater fault for these failures lay with himseff. Of all the arts writing is one of the most difficult, creating an unnatural isolation that can be as cruel and demanding of the writer as he is egotistical and selfish to those who live with him. Because in theory it is so simple to get up and walk away from the writing desk at any time and re-enter the world of reality outside, to stay within that world by will can become a tyranny. This was so often the case with Williamson, whether driven on by his daemon, by deadlines, or by sheer economic necessity, that at last those who had to bear the brunt of pent up frustrations could tolerate no more.

If all this suggests a book that presents little more than a portrait of a selfish, tormented man, careless of his relationships with family and frinds, his virtues of loyalty, courage, compassion, determination and clarity of vision restore the balance. His relationships were not all failures, often surviving intact over long

periods of time. If they were comparatively few, considering the greater number of acquaintances, we should not be surprised. The literary world abounds with the pseudo, the plaintive, the bloodsucker and the lion hunter. Perhaps surprisingly, Williamson often tolerated such people rather than throwing them out neck and crop - a mark of his understanding and compassion. Again, if he sometimes groaned at the mass of letters he received, far more of his replies were courteous, even lengthy, than mere curt acknowledgements. It is certain that few aspiring writers who sought his guidance were turned away. Even the least likely of candidates, if their sincerity was clear, were taken seriously and helped accordingly. For those few with a real talent he could and did go to the greatest lengths to promote their work. When called upon he was also an enthusiastic reviewer, never stinting in praise where he saw genuine talent even if the content was not to his taste. With visitors there was more an element of luck that had little to do with whether a meeting was a chance one or pre-arranged, and more with the moment or the individual. A casual visitor who hit the right time and wavelength could come away glowing, while the appointment might fail miserably through apprehensive tension generated in advance.

As to Williamson's literary achievement, a selection of the earlier works is cited, generally where apposite to a particular, with *Tarka the Otter* and *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight* being singled out not only for their importance but to demonstrate the scope of his writing. If *Tarka* is a remarkable book, then the *Chronicle* is a masterpiece. This does not imply that one must like it all; this was not the intention. As Williamson wrote,"I am sympathetic to all my characters", a virtue he exhorted all would-be writers to follow. If some of the later novels falter in places depite meticulous revision -was Williamson the greatest revisionist ever? - this does not seem unnatural in such a vast work that must have become increasingly hard to write as he advanced in years. But the great virtue of the work is the compassion shown to all the characters, making no judgement on them and fulfilling his dictat that "I would learn to see all things as the sun saw them, without shadows". As Daniel Farson writes, "At last I understand what he meant by the declaration...which had always irritated me, since light and shadow are the essence of life. Henry's extraordinary achievement in the early volumes lies in standing aside, casting no shadows himself, so that the reader can see with absolute clarity and judge the characters and their landscape for himself".

Once we reach the point where the *Chronicle* is finished, there is a certain sadness. Although there was none more book in 1972, and while perhaps we may be glad that he enjoyed a late mellowness relieved from the 'tyranny' of writing, there was also loneliness once the 'mainspring of life', as he described that writing, had run down. Pehaps it was merciful that once his eightieth birthday had passed without the accolade he had secretly hoped for, his mind began to wander and he was spared the harsh truth of this last neglect.

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