

MEMORIES OF HENRY WILLIAMSON

Ronald Duncan

IT WAS QUITE LIKELY that Henry Williamson and I should eventually meet. We were both writers and he had been a farmer in Norfolk while I was still farming in North Devon at a place which was only forty miles away from Baggy Point where he eventually came to live.

In spite of this proximity, it was several years before we met. This was due largely to my having been a pupil of Leavis's at Cambridge: I suffered a good deal from Leavis's narrow prejudices which of course excluded any references to Henry Williamson. Henry was dismissed as a popular writer, in so far as *Tarka the Otter* and *Salar the Salmon* were already classics, and Leavis disliked any kind of success except that of D.H. Lawrence whom he venerated and imitated. It was really very difficult for any pupil of Leavis's to read anybody else at this time except perhaps E.M. Forster whom I'm afraid I found a tea-cosy of a man, and I was unable to enjoy his work at all. Leavis was also keen on a man called Myers who wrote a novel called *The Root and the Flower*, but it is not likely that I should have been persuaded at this early time in my life to make any approach to Henry Williamson.

It was Williamson who first got in touch with me when Faber published my *Journal of a Husbandman* sometime during the '40s. He had written a very good review of this book, sent the review to me and asked if he could come to see me. I was of course extremely flattered by a well known established writer taking notice of somebody still in his early twenties. When we met I was immediately arrested by his sad spaniel eyes. I don't think I've ever seen such bruised eyes in my life. This sadness was accentuated by the levity and almost excessive jollity that he managed to produce in company. It was, as it were, an act - and I was not unaware that it was an act.

After this first meeting he used to come over and see me rather more frequently than I can honestly say I wished because I was unable, or felt unable, to help him in his deep sadness, or even to understand it. I could see that he was a compulsive writer who worked himself almost to the bone. Sometimes he used to bring over to me a novel he had just written, or the proofs of one, and in those days one could, without getting an enormous bill from the printers, rewrite the book in the margin, as his proofs indicate. Henry could not leave even the typescript alone. I have dozens of letters from him and the same applies to those. He could not write a letter without two or three post-scripts, and indeed would frequently write on the back of the envelope too. It was as if writing was as necessary to him as breathing.

In those days he used to drive over in a sports car. The sports car image meant a great deal to him. I don't know exactly why, but I suppose it was a gesture in the direction of his admiration for Lawrence

of Arabia. Henry had a great need, like many writers, for a hero, especially for a hero who was a man of action, and of course Lawrence of Arabia fitted this need perfectly. He also had a similar veneration for Ezra Pound whom he regarded as a man of action; and, I suspect, a certain liking for Mussolini and Hitler only because they were men of action.

I think his attempt to understand or to make some kind of a bridge with Germany during 1938 and 1939 was because of the main traumatic experience of his life which was undoubtedly participating in the Battle of the Somme. He never recovered psychically from that experience, and of course his interest in Oswald Mosley is of a similar kind. He really hoped that the British Union of Fascists under Mosley would prevent another holocaust between Britain and Germany. It was a vain hope, but if one had been through the Battle of the Somme then perhaps it was something that one might understand.

I can remember sometime in the late '40s being asked by the editor of the *Evening Standard* whether I would go and interview Oswald Mosley for that newspaper. Henry Williamson, hearing of this invitation, asked if he could come too. I agreed. He sat very still and quiet and did not interrupt my questions to Mosley. I myself, who had been extremely prejudiced against Mosley - indeed, I was at that time very much associated with the left wing politically - was amazed by Mosley's well established historical knowledge. The only person in contemporary politics whose knowledge could compare with Mosley's would be somebody also unpopular like Enoch Powell. No wonder Mosley was disliked; he was far too clever, far too intelligent, to be tolerated by the mediocre people who surrounded him. He was a dangerous man because he had a sharp intelligence.

Of course, after the War when we came to the '50s and the rather squalid era of John Osborne, with Kenneth Tynan blowing his bizarre bugle to usher in the kitchen sink, men of letters such as Henry Williamson and people like Rupert-Hart Davis were out of fashion. They were professional writers, and what was required now, in the ambience of the '50s, was somebody with political comment, as Tynan put it, with a chip on his shoulder and a lack of syntax in his writing. This of course excluded Henry Williamson, especially since he had made the grave error of writing two classics at an early age and winning the Hawthornden Prize.

I think actually that these two books of his, excellent as they are and comparable to the writing of Hudson the naturalist, did him some harm in his career. That is to say they created an image of Henry Williamson which was not adequate to his talent. I suffered a rather similar disadvantage when the success of *This Way to the Tomb* was tied to my tail for the next twenty years, but that is by the way.

Henry Williamson settled down to write novels in rather a Conrad like fashion. He lived a simple life near the cliffs of Baggy Point, and, I think, not consciously but unconsciously, carried out a sort of Thoreau existence.

I don't think I ever knew a writer who worked as hard as Williamson. It would be nothing to say that he worked at least eight or nine hours a day at his desk - re-writing and over writing. I suspect that there was a good deal of over writing because Williamson did have a prodigious memory for detail. I believe that one of the advantages of being as absent minded as I am is that we are then likely to forget some of the things which can be ultimately irrelevant. Williamson had a great power of observation for detail. I can remember going for many walks with him, and it would be he, not I, who would stop and notice something in the hedge or some tree which I may have passed a dozen times without noticing its existence. He also had a great love for any kind of craftsmanship, especially in wood. He would come and admire the grain of the table in my house and he would also notice any change in the furniture or any alteration in the building of my farm. This always gave him a feeling of belonging and I think it was this need to belong which was deeply seated in his character.

I did not know how much he had suffered as a child but I gather he did not have a happy childhood. I know that he suffered a great deal from the breakdown of his first marriage. I had met his first wife once and after the break-up I then met his second wife with whom I found I had very little accord. But when that marriage broke because she left him, Williamson was emotionally devastated. At this time he used to drive over and pour out his troubles to Rose Marie, my wife, for whom he had a great deal of sympathy.

It was soon after this that I arranged to go on a holiday with my wife and daughter to Sicily, Florence and Venice, and Henry, finding out where we were going and by what means, went to the travel agency in Barnstaple and arranged to fly on the same plane and stay at the same hotels. I was a little irritated by this uninvited intrusion but was so sorry for him that I did not express it. Nevertheless I regret to say that Henry used to enjoy goading me at various meals by the excuses he found for Hitler and so forth, and this would cause me at times to leave the table. But we never quarreled completely. He was always able to forgive me and I was always sorry for him.

I am afraid I have never been a reader of novels and therefore I am not competent to assess Williamson's achievements as a novelist, but I suspect very strongly that they are very much greater than they are presently valued. I should say that his great novel-sequence will probably be more valued in time than the *Forsyte Saga*. He was quite consciously trying to do for our period what Tolstoy achieved in *War and Peace*. I cannot assess whether he achieved that ambition, but it is enough sometimes in literature to have the direction and to have the purpose. This is something that Williamson never lacked; he was always a dedicated man of letters and it is high time that this age, which has cultivated so much mediocrity and misplaced literary values by social, political and racial chatter, should again look at Williamson's work and see what he achieved, both as a man and as a writer.

It is not irrelevant to mention Williamson's attraction to Wagner. He was another of Williamson's heroes and I must not despise him for

that. I think Williamson was deeply involved, not just admired, but involved in the legend of Tristan and Isolde and also in Siegfried. The attachment is I think perhaps a key to Williamson's own character. It is a characteristic of many writers to be, as it were, in love with easeful death, and I think that poor Williamson was aware of the tragic end that he was busily driving towards.

Being a writer myself I hesitate very considerably before criticising another; but I will make an exception here by quoting from a book of Williamson's *The Phasian Bird*:

The plowman in his layers of thin coats cried to his horses drawing the plow turning seven-inch furrows across the field from headland to headland while yet the soil was unfrozen. The thin and unmatched horses, fed on poor hay and few oats, their fetlocks shaggy with the grease of neglect, paused in the furrow to rest, unable to pull at the chains wrapped with strips of old sacking against the galling of their flanks: for their harness did not fit, being bought at auction for a few shillings - broken collars, worm-eaten sails, and uneven swingle-trees. Fed on bread of white flour from which the golden skin of the wheat had been sifted after grinding as 'offal', spread with margarine made in part of the fat of whales and jam of pea-straw and mangold-pulp coloured and sweetened chemically, and refreshed by cold, near milkless tea from a bottle once holding chemical fruit-drink, the teamsman holding the long lines to the rusty bits was nearly as languid as the horses. (p.14)

From this paragraph anybody must conclude, from the minute and accurate description, that here was a writer who had experienced ploughing - who had farmed and bought things at auction, who had observed the poor diet of the labourer and who sympathised with activities. Here is writing which is concrete by any terms. Here is writing which is very concerned and very accurate.

Now it was Williamson's habit to send my wife his corrected page-proofs, especially when they were bound, and before me I have *The Gold Falcon*. It is interesting to see the number of alterations and what he thought was worth changing. For instance, the line:

"...said Hobson, letting his monocle fall. He seated himself next to Manfred...."

Next to is deleted and Williamson has inserted
on the other side of Manfred.

Then a paragraph later, one had in the original,

"Oh indeed," said Manfred. After a pause: "I intend to read your new book on Hamlet while crossing to New York this week."

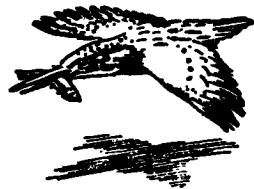
Williamson has deleted *"Oh indeed," said Manfred* and changed the passage so that it reads:

After a pause: "I intend to read your new book on Hamlet during the voyage."

And so it goes on, page after page of very careful revision, the revision of a professional writer. Such writers are rare, indeed they have become so rare that I doubt whether there is one genuine writer now being subsidised by the Arts Council or has even studied at one of our universities. Is there anybody literary even mentioning Henry Williamson at our academies? Or is he, as it were, in Coventry because of his association with Mosley? I don't know. But before we decide on whether that is just or not, we should, I think, ask the question, "What were Dante's political convictions?" Do we know? Well, as a matter of fact we do, and I don't think they would fit in with the Social Democratic Party, and would certainly not get the approval of Leavis, who was, as it were, a male Shirley Williams.

TARKA THE OTTER

Henry Williamson's much-loved story first appeared in 1927 without illustrations, but in 1932 C.F. Tunnicliffe, working with the author, made drawings of the North Devon places and scenes described in the text, and the two have become almost inseparable.



This edition is reissued in June in a de luxe format: prefaced by Sir John Fortescue's introduction to the first edition, it also contains the original ending to the story, the author's Apologia for his use of dialect words and a note written in later years describing the grief he felt while composing Tarka's heroic death scene.

"A book of transcending beauty and truth" TLS

370 30919 7 £5.95 June BODLEY HEAD