FURTHER MEMORIES OF HENRY WILLIAMSON

Guy Priest

FOLLOWING MY INITIAL INTRODUCTION TO HW in the summer of 1933 (described in the November 1981 issue of the *Journal*), I travelled to North Devon by motor cycle in July 1935 for my annual two weeks holiday.

The girl who was later to become my wife was also in Devon at that time, assisting in running a guest house owned by a friend. The house was in Combe Martin, and I decided to camp nearby, pitching my tent at the foot of a sloping field just outside the village. Fortunately, the weather was set fair, and after London I found living in the country and cooking meals over a wood fire or portable primus stove an altogether delightful experience.

I spent the days walking over the hills, exploring the sunken lanes, visiting Exmoor, and bathing in a little sandy cove near Berrynarbour, which we named Peregrine's Bay after the falcons which had an eyrie in the cliffs. With my girl for company most afternoons, it was for me an idyllic existence.

Before leaving London I had written to Henry, telling him of my plans and suggesting that perhaps I might see him during my visit. He had replied on a postcard:

> *If you send me your Combe Martin address and dates of remaining there I'll keep it by me and try to see you; but cannot make commitments of any kind as work is at high pressure for the next six weeks to finish a book for this autumn; and that is only the least of various mental unloadings of work undone.*
>
> *In haste, H.W.*

Having sent him my address, I now waited hopefully for some further communication. But as my holiday slipped away and no word came, I wrote again to Oxford Cross, asking if I might come over one afternoon. On impulse, I said I would walk down the lane past his writing hut and whistle *Brigg Fair* - we both admired Delius. If he continued the melody I would come in and meet him; if not, I would go away.

So one afternoon I rode over to the field, and noting that the gate was unlocked, I walked down the sunken lane whistling a few bars of *Brigg Fair*. There was no reply; only a solitary yellowhammer singing on a telegraph wire. Perhaps Henry hadn't heard me; I felt sure that he was at home. After further hesitation I plucked up courage and decided to go in anyway.

Quietly opening the gate, I approached the hut along a narrow path through uncut grass. Before me was the door of weathered oak, studded

with hand-forged nails, in its centre a tiny lattice like a porthole. I hesitated in some trepidation, then raised my hand to knock. At that moment the door suddenly swung back, revealing in the opening an unshaven, wild-eyed creature whom I scarcely recognised. He studied me for a brief span through half closed lids. Then he stepped back, bidding me enter. "Come in, I can give you just a few minutes." Then, easing the tension, he added, "Help yourself to lime juice; it will keep away the scurvy."

Taken aback slightly by Henry's dishevelled appearance, I gratefully poured myself a drink, and we talked briefly; I a trifle incoherent, conscious of my intrusion but also sensing in a way that he welcomed the interruption. It provided him with an excuse to stop work. The loose pages of a manuscript lay on a table, beside a portable typewriter. I didn't realise it then, but this was *Salar the Salmon*. There were charred embers of a wood fire in the open brick fireplace; a massive iron frying-pan hung beside the hearth, beside it a long, twin-pronged poker. Propped up by a window was the Howard Coster photograph of T.E. Lawrence who had died on his Brough Superior motorcycle earlier that summer.

In retrospect, I don't think we spoke of Lawrence; and certainly Henry never told me that T.E.L. had stayed in the hut, as was later claimed by Maurice Wiggin who was to spend a memorable night there, sleeping on a mattress on the shelf above the fireplace, with its tiny window and enchanting view towards the distant Two Rivers estuary.

When presently I turned to leave, Henry apologised for his lack of hospitality. All his energy must go into his work; he really had very little else to give. The author's life was highly unnatural; one day I would understand. For my part, I didn't then fully realise how severe was the strain under which he had been working for the past weeks and months. Later, referring to this period of writing the salmon book, he said he had felt that "if the salmon didn't soon die, he would", so the end was cut short.

I didn't see Henry again during the remainder of my holiday: and *Salar* was published by Faber and Faber in October of that year. During late September my sister spent a short holiday at Combe Martin with my girl friend, and one day, visiting Georgeham, they chanced to be at Ox's Cross when Henry emerged from his gateway. Apparently they noticed each other, but didn't speak. This incident remained in HW's memory, to be recalled in a letter he later wrote to me:

Boxing Day 1935

Many thanks for the newspaper and also for the tobacco pouch. Both were kind thoughts on your part and I am grateful. Please will you accept a copy of the Red Deer pamphlet which I enclose. It was hastily written and its contents are its own criticism.

Some people prefer Salar to Tarka; others prefer Tarka. There is one glory of the sun, and another of the moon, even of a moon in eclipse.

Yes, I recall the two girls on the hill, and thought there was

some link with you, but could not formulate why.

The quotation from John Moore's essay about the comparative merits of Hudson and Jefferies I find crude and repellent. The man lacks sensibility, as well as skill. If you read Massingham on Jefferies' Story of My Heart you will find a similar lack, although not so crudely deficient; and then if you turn to Hudson's reflexions on Jefferies in, I think, one of the early chapters in Nature in Downland, you will see what sensibility is. That is a judgement by a peer; although Jefferies had gifts far transcending any possessed by Hudson. The gifts were ruined partly by environment, we know; but to those with eyes to see, they are uniquely apparent. No more of Mr. Moore, please.

It seems most ungracious after your gifts to say that I am not a free agent in the matter of signing books of mine; but such is the fact. I have an arrangement with publishers never to dilute those limited editions which have been sold to 'customers'. To this I have always adhered, even in domestic circles,sso please forgive me. The enclosed copy, by the way, is somewhat rare; I think only one is or was ever on the market. Please sell it any time you need money, although I fear it is only worth a pound or two.

This is a loose letter; but I have 142 to reply to before me.

I had asked if Henry would kindly autograph a copy of *Tarka*, which I was giving to a young friend in Grantchester: the request was not for myself. But I was most gratified to have the privately printed copy of *The Red Deer* inscribed to me by the author.

On 21 March 1936 Henry made the first of a series of broadcast talks from BBC Bristol. (This was, I believe, his first radio talk, although he had broadcast briefly in an interview with John (later Sir John) Heygate from Savoy Hill.) This initial talk, from Whiteladies Road, was the beginning of a long and fruitful association with the Beeb, to be abruptly terminated on the outbreak of the Second World War because of Henry's involvement with Sir Oswald Mosley and his British Union of Fascists. But all that bitter and controversial matter was in the future as I listened to that first nature programme. I thought his personality came over extremely well on radio, and I wrote to congratulate him. He replied by postcard on 25 March:

Many thanks for letter. They hurried that first talk, Cardiff being three minutes late and so I had to gabble. But not again. Next week about Baggy. Old stuff, of course; like Rachmaninoff forced to play his Prelude two thousand times. Have just finished selection of RJ with critical preface and notes. Also FLAX in one volume next month; about 15 pages rewritten, with extra page for Pathway. You have to split your pellicle again and again: still underwater, necessary for growth. See life as it is; not through philosophical eyes. That kills writing. Try to write always in plain, everyday language. You still strive for effect; for the bouquet of wine while the grapes are still growing. Let them grow. Send a card when you go to Devon, and I'll try for a walk; but am still frightfully busy with things; of which literary work is the least part.

Unbeknown to me, Henry was then planning to leave the West Country and migrate across England to the North Norfolk coast for the farming venture. He had recently visited Old Hall Farm at Stiffkey with a view to purchase, and the long protracted negotiations were then in course. I was also planning a migration, having decided to quit my job in London and concentrate on finishing a novel I was then trying to write. My girl friend was once more to spend the summer at Combe Martin, and I planned to take my tent and camp in the combe and write.

At the end of May I left London with £25 in my pocket, and after a brief stay in Cambridge, set out for the West Country, spending my first night at Stonehenge.

At first my stay in Devon was blessed with what Daniel Farson calls "Williamson Weather" - sunshine from cloudless skies - and I settled down to what promised to be an enjoyable time, often dreamed about in London: living close to nature with freedom to come and go as I wished, cooking meals in the open, walking and swimming, plus a few hours each day of what I fondly imagined to be 'creative writing'.

My camp was high up on a hillside, sloping steeply to a brook at its foot. My tent door faced west, and the spot was an ideal vantage point for watching bird life. Each morning a pair of ravens flew over, winging up the valley, and usually two or three buzzards were overhead during the day. I loved watching these great hawks gliding and wheeling so effortlessly on rising thermals, sometimes being mobbed by gulls and wailing as if in distress as they side-slipped and soared to avoid their tormentors.

Sometimes a peregrine cut across the sky, and once a sparrowhawk dashed over the hedge, seized a linnet from a thorn bush, and was gone. Swallows spent the long days hawking over the summer grasses, and at night brown owls called among the scrub oaks on the side of the combe.

Then the rains came.

One evening, as I sat on the shore with my girl friend, after a swim in Peregrine's Bay, I noticed that the wind, for many days north-westerly, had veered and backed to thr south-west. I recalled what an old fisherman had told me down by the harbour concerning that wind: "If her goes back gwin the zun be zure 'twull rain vor long". As we climbed the cliff path on our way back to the village, dark clouds were gathering ominously over the hills.

Some time later, standing before my tent, watching the last glitter of the bright star in the constellation of the Eagle, I felt the first spots of rain upon my face. I crawled into my sleeping bag as a rushing wind filled the vlley. A group of elm trees at the edge of the field began to sway and moan. I lay still, holding my breath, listening to the increasing roar of the blast, which came in fitful gusts. And in the lull between I could hear the roar of the sea half a mile away.

Suddenly a squall of rain like swanshot beat a tattoo on the

slackened canvas above my head. Then a lull in the volleys smiting the tent was followed by an immense and vivid flash. Eight seconds later came the thunder, like some vast detonation, submerging all other sounds before rumbling and muttering away into the distance. Another flash followed, pursued by a second peal of thunder. Two storms were approaching: one down the valley from the south-west, above which was my camp; the other between the range of downs comprising Longstone Down and the Great and Little Hangmen, and the hills opposite, extending towards Exmoor. Following these channels the storms were hurrying to the sea, to converge over the village and harbour below.

As I cowered beneath my flimsy canvas in this Wagnerian setting - a foretaste of *The Gale of the World* - the skies opened and the rain lashed down.

Sometime after midnight the storms passed; miraculously the winds abated, and the rain ceased as abruptly as it had begun. In the eerie silence I could hear the steady drip-drip from nearby foliage and the rising chatter of the stream in the valley below. I looked out of my tent at the clearing sky, where stars were reappearing. High up, through a trailing edge of cloud, shone a wasting moon. Above the south-western ridge of the downs Aquila was flashing. Relieved to find myslef still alive and reasonably dry, I curled up in my down bag, and sleep claimed me.

Six hours later I was awakened by the sound of renewed wind on the tent and the hiss of fine grey rain spraying the taut canvas. Through a raised flap of the doorway I peered out at a damp and desolate morning in which all things seemed to have lost form and colour in mist swirling down from the moor. Pulling on some clothes and an old mackintosh, I emerged from my lowly shelter and stood up.

Since last I had gazed upon it, the sky appeared to have descended several thousand feet, the tops of the hills being blotted out with clouds filling the valleys. The only sounds were the voices of the waters, plus a disconsolate lamb seeking its mother ewe, and a handful of gulls that emerged from the mist, crying like souls in torment. I watched them disappear; then in a mood of gloom and despondency, I pulled up the collar of my raincoat and walked down the field to fetch the milk.

The day passed slowly away in rain - a fine grey mist which is a part of the moor. The following day was the same, and the next, until a week passed in moist grey gloom with the sun unseen. Camping in these conditions was a cheerless business. My hiking tent was so small that I could only crouch or kneel in the doorway, so feeding was a problem. I managed to operate the primus inside a tea-chest turned on its side, enabling some cooking to be undertaken. But mostly I survived on unheated food supplemented by hot drinks. Altogether a cold and miserable time, with perpetually wet clothing and nowhere to go for comapny except to the pub down by the harbour. All thoughts of writing were temporarily abandoned, though I did send a letter to Henry, a woebegone appeal for sympathy. A reply came from Filleigh:

Thanks for your letter. I fear this rain may make you melancholy. I have not made any appointments with anyone for months, except business one with BBC etc; and cannot do so. People ask me to tennis; I cant even accept; at present it is too much even to think about. So please be understanding if I say I cannot meet you by arrangement, or anyone else; but if we chance to meet at Woolacombe, where I go a lot now that a friend of 15 years (Mais) is there, then we can have some cider in the pub at 7 and a bathe before that. But dont try to find me in my field; for when there I cannot see anyone. As I told you, I am somewhat exhausted, having had to look after so many incompetent people's affairs, and think about them, and try and make them normal; and this ruins all my work at the moment, and has done so for the past 2 years. So I have no reserve at all and cant talk with people about the things which they expect me to be interested in. I am not interested in them anyway. Only in the need to be alone, and to relax, and think of nothing. So I fear all normally interesting things just pass me by at present.

From this it appeared that I was not alone in the slough of despond. Then, for me, fortune took a turn for the better; I was offered writing accommodation in a lean-to conservatory attached to the guest house where my girl friend worked. Here, among potted plants, and in company with numerous spiders, I now spent several hours each day working on my book. As June gave way to July, slowly the weather improved, and there were even days when I found it uncomforatbly hot in my greenhouse.

I had now resumed my daily swim in the sea, and made several trips to Woolacombe in the hope of meeting HW, but without success. And then one afternoon, yes, surely there was something familiar about the tall figure standing by the rocks, his back towards me? But there was someone with him. A girl. They were engaged in an animated conversation, in which Henry was gesticulating with his arms.

Diffidently, I remained at a little distance; but Henry suddenly seemed to sense my presence, for he turned towards me with a friendly wave of his hand. It seemed that his recent mood of melancholy had vanished; now he appeared to be boyishly light-hearted. Perhaps it was the presence of his companion, a bespectacled, atrractive young lady to whom I was now introduced: his secretary-companion 'Felicity' of *The Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight.*

We chatted for a while, seated on the sands; then went for a swim, and later a drink at the pub. I lost all awareness of time; I was enthralled by this new partnership. When we parted Henry said they were staying at the field, and if I cared to I might join them on the morrow. So I spent most of the next day in their company.

When I arrived the hut door was open and Henry was sitting in his armchair by the hearth, leafing through some papers. 'Felicity' was standing behind the chair, smiling and humming a tune as she reverently combed his hair, which had apparently just been washed. The scene was almost biblical; master and handmaiden, surrounded by an air of quiet

contentment and mutual accord; in sharp contrast to later anguish and unhappiness. But for today amity smiled upon us in the field as we ate a picnic lunch under the trees.

Later we all went down to the beach at Putsborough, following the back road over the down behind Pickwell Manor and clambering down the side of a combe to a little stream among thorns and brambles, where whitethroats 'churred' among tall nettles. This was the spot where Henry had often observed and listened to the nightjar, the 'goat-sucker' of country-folk; and behind us, on rising ground, was the scene of the memorable *The Linhay on the Downs*, that adventure of earlier years, shortly after his marriage when he was living at Crowberry Cottage in Georgeham.

Reaching the sands, we walked barefoot along the tide edge towards Baggy cliffs, the three of us arm in arm, Henry in the centre. He was in aerywheel mood, light-hearted and apparently carefree. Suddenly turning to me with his piercing gaze, he declared that he was Byron and I was Shelley! I was astonished by his extravagant imagery, but captivated by his boyish sense of fun. 'Felicity' laughed happily and chided him playfully for such fancies; and for a brief space we three seemed to be in unison under the sun. For me this was a singularly happy occasion, and one that will always remain golden in memory.

During the remainder of July Henry made several visits to the field from his cottage at Shallowford. But now he was alone. I saw him once or twice and on one occasion he asked me to photograph him in his chair by the hearth. I used his Rolleiflex camera; and afterwards he took a picture of me seated in the same chair, a print of which he sent me later. It now reposes in my copy of *The Red Deer* with other treasured photographs.

In August Mrs Williamson and the children came to the field, taking up residence in the loft, the caravan and a tent, Henry "maintaining a splendid isolation in the SW corner", as he recorded in the diary which was to be published as *Goodbye West Country* the following year. Quoting further from those pages: "A young man feeds with us in the loft. I think he is a fan. Always a young man is there - sometimes with a different face, but always the same ideas. I feel like an old stag squired by a staggart: but as Windles and the fan get on happily, all is well".

I was that staggart, Windles being, of course, Henry's eldest son, then aged about eleven. There were also John, Margaret and baby Robert, together with a young Irish nanny.

Windles and I became firm friends and I spent an increasing amount of time at the field, riding over from Combe Martin on my motor cycle after breakfast, and becoming for a time almost one of the family. Mostly Henry was present only for communal meals in the loft, otherwise retreating to the sanctuary of his hut to write. But there were occasions when we all went down to the beach for a picnic, one such being recorded by Henry in his book, when the Zeppelin Hindenburg flew over. At the time he was driving a Crossley car, a large, heavy open four-seater with artillery wheels - the Silver Eagle then undergoing repairs

following the capsizing episode described in *Goodbye West Country*. I recall our trundling slowly along the narrow sunken lane to Putsborough, the car overflowing with children and picnic baskets. Henry was in clowning mood, wearing a wide-peaked American baseball cap brought back from his recent visit to the States. The sun was hot, reminding him of Florida, and for the moment he was the genial, tolerant *pater familias*. Walking down the steeply sloping field to the beach near Vention Cottage, baby Robert on his back, he gave an impersonation of a negro from the deep south, much to the amusement of the children. For the time being he had escaped 'the mind-forg'd manacles', and harmony reigned. But later when we were going in to bathe and Windles hung back, reluctant to take the plunge, he roughly grabbed the boy by the arm, and dragging him into the water, plunged him into a wave. Windles emerged in tears, and I instinctively placed an arm round his shoulders. Presently harmony was restored; but for me the memory was not to be expunged. In later years the estrangement between father and son was to reach breaking point.

At that time it was the custom to walk down to Arty's each morning to collect the mail. This was a chore I often undertook, in company with Windles. We always took a jerrycan to bring back drinking water on our return. One morning there was a long official-looking envelope for Henry, which he presently opened to produce some documents tied with pink tape. Sitting in the sun with the children round him - they had been hastily summoned to attend this little ritual - their father explained that the documents in his hands were the deeds of the farm in Norfolk to which they were all shortly to move, and which in time would become their heritage of England.

The children listened in fascination as he described how wonderful the farm would be; how they would ride their own ponies; how there would be chickens and geese and turkeys, as well as cows and pigs; how they would churn their own butter and cure their own bacon; how it would be a rejuvenation of their lives as a family, as part of a new and Greater Britain.

In imagination it was already reality; but later he admitted to me that he was haunted by the fear that the whole farming plan was a ghastly mistake, and he wondered if he could go through with it. With no practical knowledge of agriculture, he had bought a derelict farm with no proper living accommodation in a part of the country that was alien to him, and, under-capitalised, was proposeng to move there and try to become a successful farmer. *The Story of a Norfolk Farm* recounts what happened. Henry certainly didn't lack determination. As related in that book, 'the staggart' witnessed his signature on the title deeds, conferring on Henry William Williamson the ownership of Old Castle Farm, Stiffkey, Wells-next-the-Sea, North Norfolk.