

Secretary's Notes

DIARY DATE - SPRING MEETING 1983

To be held in Norfolk, 14-15 May 1983. The venue will be the Blakeney Hotel, which proved popular in 1981. By making an early reservation for our evening function I have negotiated an accommodation tariff at the 1981 level, though not without further discount this time.

Permission to visit Old Hall Farm has once again kindly been given by Lord Buxton, and a programme will be arranged to include an event for the Sunday morning in addition to a full Saturday schedule.

LEWISHAM 1982

How would the South London of 1982 - an area previously unvisited by me - match that conceived in the mind from the meticulous descriptions drawn in the early novels of the *Chronicle*? I awaited the answer in anticipation as I journeyed there on a bright day in May.

If much of 'Williamson Country' in Devon had proved immediately familiar and dear on first sight, could a London suburb, described as it used to be seventy and more years ago, possibly still be in the least recognisable? No doubt before that weekend the same thought was in the minds of others. If time, alas, did not allow a full answer, there was more than enough to warrant and to arouse desire for a longer look at another time.

In the event, the notes of David Hoyle with the map drawn by Peter Rothwell proved to be of the greatest help, allowing even the stranger to chart a course dismayed (in my case particularly) by the seemingly never-ending rush and roar of traffic. Fortunately, many of the places of special interest are not only away from the hustle and bustle but also retain, if sometimes a little changed, their original physical form. Soon the imagination could merge into the ambience of Edwardian days.

For myself, nowhere was this more apparent - unless perhaps at Keston Ponds, of which more later - than at 'Hillside Road'; hardly surprising, perhaps, since this row of houses looking across to Hilly Fields, is the very hub and root of the London novels, the lives portrayed there a microcosm of a vanished world. If an eye-blink could remove the appendages of modern life there would be little wonder in seeing Richard, on his alternative route home, walking briskly down the Gully, carrying the black bag that held the immemorial marmalade sandwiches; or of the shambling puppet figure of Uncle Hugh; the dream-like Helena gliding by in her white dress; the sound of clicking shears and the bobbing jauntily-set cap of 'Sailor' Jenkins; and, on still evenings, the sound of the old tunes drifting down from the bandstand. Even a vestige of the Backfield remains to this day. Surprises? How tiny is the garden of 'No. 11' compared to that of the imagination!

Later, a good deal of the Lewisham and its environs contemporary, or almost so, with HW's youth, was shown in the absorbing slides shown to us by Joan Reed, accompanied by her wonderfully informative talk. Only as a result of her vast knowledge of local history and her subsequent patient and dedicated work in translating fiction into reality, do we have the true and exact locations of the area we enjoy today.

The same must be said of John Glanfield's meticulous work, with the splendid co-operation of the old and new owners, on 'No. 11 Hillside Road' itself. The essential text of his talk (after an excellent buffet) appeared in the last *Journal* but, with the aid of a wide range of slides and a number of most appropriate readings, this was expanded into a truly fascinating and memorable 'journey' back in time to the moment when Richard put his key into the original well-oiled lock. (Recently it has been intriguing to learn from 'our' Richard that much of the furniture so fully described in the novels still survives, having passed to Henry's older sister, who died only recently.)

The seminar on Sunday morning had time only to get into stride after a most persuasive hypothesis by David Hoyle; that Williamson's novels of 'cause and effect' were based upon the erroneous belief that the ills of modern man result from centralisation and urbanisation, and might be set right by a return to the 'Golden Age' of rural tradition. This was a fatal flaw, it was proposed, of an illusory past that had always been recalled retrospectively through the ages; the ideal of imagination, but never of experience. Then it was time to embus for Keston Ponds. There were brief pauses to view Colfe's School and a short exploratory break in Whitefoot Lane before we headed south into Kent, in thickening traffic, until finally we succumbed to the press of vehicles making, it turned out, for the annual Biggin Hill Air Show. Fumes apart, the last mile or so travelled on foot was no hardship, and slowly to come upon the ponds, set among newly-dressed trees, was most pleasant. A member who had known the ponds for many years kindly pointed out the changes of recent years (mainly a trend towards formalisation, so beloved by officialdom) wrought since the area had fallen under the aegis of the Greater London Council, a move deplored by the people of Kent. But on a day not beset by the hordes of summer, it was easy enough to slip back in time and recall the visits recorded in the novels that show how deeply this place had been held in affection. There are still big carp nosing in the weedbeds, and glinting shoals of roach - though I fancy the angler would have to be a very early riser to be successful here - just as when Henry was a boy.

SOME REACTIONS TO HENRY: AN APPRECIATION BY DANIEL FARSON

I do not know how Mr Farson felt about the publicity that followed the publication of his book, but, at all events, it was certainly not ignored by the media. There was a T.V. interview on BBC South West; a spot on Radio 2's *Around Midnight*; an interview on *A Touch of Sherrin*, Radio 4, where the interjections of fellow-guest Miss Zsa-Zsa Gabor - "But daaarling, wasn't he a Fascist?" - may have been disconcerting. Some

nicely read extracts from *Tarka* led into a *Kaleidoscope* (Radio 4) assessment by and interview with Paul Vaughn, and a rather scrappy chat with Colin Wilson, identified as a reviewer of the book. Mr Wilson kindly expressed the view that Williamson "could be a very good writer", but sided with the opinion set down by Robert Graves in a letter that, as a man he was "a pious crook". The papers generally approved of Mr Farson's treatment: a "candid but affectionate profile" (*Sunday Express*); "has worked hard to try to provide a rounded picture" (*Daily Telegraph*); "a delightful word picture of a complex man" (*North Devon Journal*); "another valuable testimony and assessment" (*Catholic Herald*). Less satisfied was *The Times*: "Henry has the tumbled together structure of a colour magazine contribution"; but the reviewer also said, "It is only fair to add that this book is both shrewd about Williamson as a man and attractively modest".

Judgement of the subject concentrated heavily on his character, with comment on his political beliefs featuring in most reviews. If the judgements were not unduly harsh ("a naive idealist", "a harmless eccentric", "a political simpleton" and "a pathetic folly") they confirmed an earlier view that his intransigence cost him at least one honour, and that it was this general criticism, far more than differences of opinion about his talent and stature as a writer, that weighed the scales against him.

Indeed, reference to his books and their quality, with odd exceptions, was largely fleeting: I personally doubt if more than the odd reviewer could honestly say he had read more than a handful of them. Only Fr Brocard Sewell (*The Catholic Herald*), and John Braine (*The Spectator*), really tried to expand beyond the *Tarka/Salar* duo or the generic *Flax* and *Chronicle* to specific works.

Not unnaturally, much space was devoted to other facets of his character and human relationships: "a most unattractive man: a selfish liar, childishly mean, whiningly small-minded and viciously cantankerous", suggested *The Sunday Express*. *The Daily Telegraph*: "a confirmed myth-maker with only one subject for his myths - himself". And, in a comparison with Buchan, a biography of whom was reviewed in parallel in *The Times*, "Henry Williamson was, outside his writings, largely squalid and pitiable: unbalanced, cruel, immensely dishonest and, what is more, enormously silly and embarrassing". Most of these adjectives were repeated elsewhere yet, in an otherwise waspish review, Mr Auberon Waugh (*Daily Mail*) managed to say, "Mr Farson's book convinced me (despite the author's best intention) that he was also a decidedly unpleasant man. But most of his women - including two wives and a secretary-companion of 20 years' standing - remember him with affection. So do several of his children".

Without partiality I must confess that the judgement of Fr Brocard Sewell, who knew Williamson better than most outside his family, is not only appealing, but seems far nearer the truth. "Williamson had infinite charm, and yet was a difficult personality. He found it difficult to live with himself, let alone with other people. He had a genius for friendship, sometimes spoiled by what seemed like a genius for destroying

it... Like many great artists he lived on his nerves, which often made things difficult for his family and friends. But he was his own severest judge." I also liked very much the thoughtful and honest appraisal by John Braine, a man, I suspect (I do not know) who can identify with many of the problems that beset Williamson. He concluded thus:

He (Farson) shows us Williamson as he really was - a complexity of contradictions, tough yet vulnerable, a tormentor, yet tormented, chaotically self-absorbed yet with the capacity to reach out far beyond himself. Few have written better about war and few have written better about the English countryside. Mr Farson is wise, tolerant and understanding. This book is also the record of a friendship; it's all the more moving because the two friends were so wildly different. It isn't a sad story. Williamson's personal life was a disaster area, but his books continue to give us delight. God writes straight with crooked lines.

A CORRECTION TO "A BIZARRE NOTE" OF *THE HWS JOURNAL*, NO. 5

In this note I referred to a haunted story, 'Unknown', as only having appeared in a Sunday supplement. This is incorrect; the supplement only printed a contracted version of the story that appears in both the first (1923) and Revised (1934) editions of *The Peregrine's Saga*.

J.H.

RONALD DUNCAN

We were saddened to read of the death last June of Ronald Duncan, the dramatist, at the age of 68. It was Ronald Duncan who gave a lively account (in the *Journal* No. 5, May 1982) of his association with Henry Williamson. His work in drama and that of Williamson in fiction may have been poles apart, but they had something in common; they were both 'natural rebels' and Duncan was similarly devoted, at one stage of his career, to a farming life - and that was in North Devon. Both writers, it may be ruefully added, are suffering from the unfair neglect of posterity.

R.E.W.