

Letters

A DEEP PARADOX

It was bold of David Hoyle to bring out into the open Henry Williamson's fascist beliefs in his article 'In the Monkey House' in *Journal No.4*.

At the risk of being branded an apologist for British fascism, I feel it should be made clear that Henry Williamson was not alone amongst intellectuals in supporting the fascist movements in Europe. In England, writers such as Roy Campbell, W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis and T.S. Eliot were sympathetic to fascist ideologies. T.E. Lawrence, it will be remembered, was killed on his motorcycle after returning from the post office where he had sent a telegram to Henry Williamson to say that he would be willing to discuss meeting Hitler.

In his Foreword to *The Appeal of Fascism**^x, Stephen Spender writes:

In the minds of writers who thought that their first obligation in their art was to keep open lines of communication with the dead, fascism represented order, a return to the past tradition, opposition to Communism and social decadence. On account of the enthusiasm which the first years of Mussolini's and Hitler's regimes inspired in young Italians and Germans, it also seemed vitalist, an expression of the forces of life. What they believed in was civilisation and saw fascism as a means of defending civilised standards.

Is it really incredible, as David Hoyle would have us believe, that Henry Williamson was attracted to the fascist movement? As one who had been led by Lloyd George to believe

in a land fit for heroes after World War I, Henry Williamson could see only the cynical consignment of those who had survived the blood-bath to the unemployment queues.

Henry made his choice and paid the price - I think no less of him for doing so.

**The Appeal of Fascism A Study of Intellectuals and Fascism, 1919-1945*, by Alastair Hamilton with a Foreword by Stephen Spender. Anthony Blond, London, 1971. A photograph of HW appears opposite p.264 to support several pages of text about him.

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Middx

I welcome David Hoyle's recent article drawing attention to the deep paradox within Williamson's life and work and agree entirely with his condemnation of Henry's far-right politics.

If, by default, we fail to submit Henry's paradoxical ideas to critical examination then we run the risk of first blindly tolerating the political aberration and then allowing a general right-wing stance which excuses, or covertly accepts, that aberration to become the unquestioned norm of our Society.

This would be sad, not only because, as a Socialist, I would then feel unable to continue my membership, but also because such a stance would deter many potential members and so distort the Society's growth.

The fact is that there is no necessary association between what is fine in Henry's work and the politics only of the right. I have always thought the thrust of his *feeling* ran in precisely the opposite direction. My own beliefs stem, tangibly if indirectly, from precisely these aspects of his writing. One thinks of his portrayal of the poor, of the 'Socialist Oak' chapter in *Donkey Boy*, of the images of blindness and injustice which pervade *The Golden Virgin*, of the attacks on an uncontrolled industrialism, and particularly of his faith in brotherhood and the sheer compassion which allows us, the readers, to come to terms with people divided from us who nevertheless share our hopes for a better world. These things (among others) have led me over the years to seek a realistic political response in my own life, but it has first been necessary to recognise Henry's complete failure in doing this himself.

Even the Mosleyite connection, if examined critically, leads one in the same direction. Foremost in the Mosley rebellion of 1930 were many ILPers and Labour Party members, including Nye Bevan, who shared Mosley's ideas of demand management, social spending, a high wage economy and democratic control of financial resources. But when Mosley split with the party (forgetting, in his zeal, what these reforms were for) Bevan remained loyal to his own people, so that it was Bevan and not Mosley who introduced the National Health Service, as it was the Labour Party, with its socialist ideals, that created the welfare state and not Mosley's perversion of those ideals.

With those who still feel that all this politics is beside the point I can only disagree. Anyone who has been moved by the sufferings

of the Wallaces and Cranmers must know that these things *matter*. But we have a duty to look at Henry, not just *with* him, and firmly reject what is unacceptable about both the man and the writings.

If there is clarity (someone once said) there would be no need for charity. For this to happen we must first allow the sun to shine from a clear sky, and not remain buried in the sands.

Richard Russell

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The David Hoyle article 'In the Monkey House' (what an objectionable title) in your November issue saddened and distressed me, as it will many other members of the Society who shared Henry Williamson's political views.

He asks how Henry "could actively and knowingly align himself with a movement like the British Union of Fascists". Quite easily. Thousands of us joined, for reasons which varied according to our personal background and experiences; basically, not because of our own 'sense of failure' but of that of the major political parties, which had dismaly failed to build the 'land fit for heroes' that Henry's generation had been promised during the first World War.

My personal background was very different from that of my old friend Henry. I am very much a product of the Welsh valleys of the thirties, with their mass unemployment and poverty. I was therefore attracted to Mosley's 'dynamic economic policies', which owed nothing to foreign

models, and whose validity has never seriously been challenged.

I detected no "emphasis on violence" in British fascism. I helped to defend with my bare hands freedom of speech attacked by armed thugs. I did not derive a masochistic pleasure on being assaulted in my own flat with knuckle-dusters, or put into hospital from a blow from a brick thrown by 'democrats'.

Why was it strange for Henry to turn to British fascism to try to avoid a second world war? Mosley advocated peace, but also rearmament in case his efforts failed. His political opponents, on the contrary, insisted that war against Hitler was necessary, but disarmed Britain dangerously before declaring it! Many of my comrades in the army, for which I volunteered after my release from internment under 18B, died as a result, as Henry's had in the first world war.

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(Secretary to the late
Sir Oswald Mosley)
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FRIENDS, ROMANS, COUNTRYMEN

I am sure that you will be interested to learn that a reference to Henry Williamson occurred in the *Anglisng* magazine of April 1981. This included an interesting article on Caesar's Pool by Bob Rolph, who was describing the range of fish to be seen in these Keston Ponds, a beauty spot near Bromley, Kent. He records:

"Large carp were certainly resident in Caesar's Pool before the First World War. Henry Williamson, the celebrated author of *Tarka the*

Otter and *Salar the Salmon*, relates boyhood memories of fishing there during the summer of 1913 in his book *A Clear Water Stream*."

The writer quotes extensively from the book in order to relate the extraordinary size of fish seen by Williamson, which were clearly as difficult to catch in those days as now. At that time Keston's association with the Romans was little more than a legend, but it is interesting to note that in recent years a large Roman site has been uncovered on the nearby slopes just behind this famous pond. It is nice to know that Henry Williamson is also remembered there.

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My first acquaintance with the writing of HW was when a friend lent me a book called *The Beautiful Years* saying, "This is a most marvellous evocation of boyhood, you must read it." I did, and was immediately captivated. Going on to read the rest of *The Flax of Dream* I found that here was a writer who went straight to the very core of my being. I was moved more than ever before in my life, and at the end of the four books wept uncontrollably at the pity of it, and at the way I had been touched.

I then went on to read the *Chronicle*, but found that I could only take about a couple of books a year; they were too moving to read continuously. When I was about half way through the *Chronicle*, and also

At a rather low ebb in my life, I wrote to HW telling how much his books meant to me, mentioning in passing that I was going through a bad patch (one is so boring when depressed!). He wrote back a delightful letter, which I treasure, cheering me up enormously and suggesting other books that I should read by authors he admired.

Over the next four or five years I gradually read on through the *Chronicle*, savouring it not only as the fine document that it is, but as one savours a close friendship - careful not to overuse it, but secure in the knowledge that one has found someone with whom one has a special rapport. During these years I was resolved that when I had read the final book I would pluck up the courage to go to meet him.

When the time came I wrote a careful letter, knowing that he was a bit unpredictable about visitors, and sent it off.

The day after I posted it, he died.

The shock and disappointment were indescribable. It was as if a close member of my family had died; indeed a close friend can be even more important than one's family.

In a dazed state I drove down to the funeral, and afterwards walked up to Ox's Cross and sat down to write out my feelings before making the return journey. (It was uncanny to see, in the third journal, a picture of John Gregory sitting just where I had sat writing.)

I then drove home, completing the round trip of about 750 miles in the one day, so encapsulated by grief that I barely noticed the driving.

This is what I wrote at Ox's

Cross:

AUGUST 18th, 1977

*Here's the story you can't write,
old fellow.
The Devon church all bright with
sun and flowers,
The village women's kindly burring
voices,
The gruff men, the London folk,
And you borne in on shoulders high
In sturdy elm.*

*You would have liked the simple
service,
The Lord's My Shepherd, and
Abide with Me,
The cheerful parson spoke so
kindly of you
Reassuring us of your whereabouts -
We know we've lost you, you went
before today.*

*Then out into the sunny churchyard
We hold our breath - to stop the
flow of time
Perpetrating this enormity on you.
There's such a very large pile of
earth, old fellow.
The children throw their flowers
in, and wonder.
There's a swarm of bees round the
church tower.
The Blessing.
Nobody moves.
Nobody wants to leave you there
alone.*

*Slowly we move.
The burring voice: "Ah, we
remember,
He used to go down on the beach
And gather up all the seaweed
And set it alight."
"Nineteen ~~that was.~~" ^{/ twenty}
"He was a character." (And proudly)
"We knew him all right."*

*The tourist cars push by along the
narrow lane
In 'tireless pursuit of pleasure
metal-clad
Little knowing that the small*

*crowd by the church
Has just lost
A flame of pure light.*

A few months ago, the friend who first lent me *The Beautiful Years* sent me a cutting from his local Norfolk newspaper, 'On the trail of the Otter Man, telling of the Henry Williamson Society and its visit to the Norfolk Farm. I wrote to the Society c/o the farm, but heard no more.

Last week my son and I just happened to pop into the Book Fair at York for a short time (which became two hours) and just happened to meet Stephen Francis Clarke...

June Emerson
Windmill Farm
Ampleforth
Yorkshire

GENIUS OF FRIENDSHIP

11.25 a.m. 13th May, 1935
Williamson Shallowford Filleigh

LUNCH TUESDAY WET FINE COTTAGE
1MILE NORTH BOVINGDON CAMP.

SHAW

Returning from Bovingdon Camp after sending that telegram to Henry Williamson, T.E. Lawrence had a motor-cycle accident. He did not regain consciousness and died six days later.

This tragic death, surrounded by mystery still, was the end of a friendship spanning some seven years. How close was this friendship? This has always puzzled me.

The friendship commenced in early 1928 with a letter to HW from Edward Garnett, containing T.E.L.'s criticism of *Tarka*. Letters continued to be exchanged up to the last letter from HW dated 10th May, 1935. In this letter writing HW apparently took the initiative, yet it would appear that they only met twice. The first meeting was on Sunday 27th July, 1929, a visit to HW's home in Devon. This visit lasted 1½ hours, as T.E.L. had to return to camp. The next meeting was five years later on 28th February, 1934.(1) This was at Southampton on the *BERENGARA*, prior to HW's departure to America. Again, it was a short meeting, lasting only a half hour or so. Apart from the letters, therefore, they only actually met for some two hours.

How great, therefore, was the friendship? In the *HWS Journal No. 3* the article by John Gregory tells of HW stating to the author that T.E.L. slept in his hut. Alas, apparently not so.

What I would really like to know is exactly what were the contents of HW's last letter to T.E.L. on 10th May 1935. This letter apparently never was found in the cottage at Clouds Hill after T.E.L.'s death.(2)

Regarding the letter, HW confuses the situation by giving three versions as to its contents.

(i) The most well-known version perhaps is outlined in HW's chapter in *T.E. Lawrence by his Friends*.

*'The new age must begin:
Europe was ready for peace:
Lawrence was the natural leader of that age in England.
I dreamed of an Anglo-Saxon friendship, the beginning of the purification of Europe.'*

Hitler and Lawrence must meet.'
I wrote this to him. (3)

(ii) In *The Secret Lives of Lawrence of Arabia* the letter indicates that HW had written to T.E.S. suggesting that he should call and see him at Clouds Hill to get his advice about the unfinished autobiography of V.M. Yeates, author of *Winged Victory*. (I wonder if that autobiography was ever published?) HW concluded by the letter by saying "I'll call in anyway on Tuesday unless rainy day". This version suggests that there must be a copy of the letter somewhere. (4)

(iii) The postscript in *Devon Holiday* by HW states "He crashed his motor-cycle a few minutes after sending a telegram in answer to a letter of mine in which I asked if I might go and seem him and show; him a proof copy of this book. That telegram is probably the last thing he wrote".

So there you have it - three distinct versions. Perhaps, though, he wrote about the Hitler meeting, V.M. Yeates and *Devon Holiday* in the same one letter?

T.E.L.'s final telegram to HW - I wonder where that telegram is now. Where too is the HW letter of 10th May 1935? Does someone actually have it? Is it mixed with the other private papers of T.E.L., secure in the Bodleian Library at Oxford until the year 2000?

I don't think, somehow, that I shall be around then. Please, therefore, if someone has researched deeper into the HW/T.E.L. relationship, come forth via the Journal letter column.

Dare I ask too if all the letters from T.E.L. to HW are with the Williamson Trust? If so, if only at some future date, they could be published in full by the HW Society. What a wonderful 'First Edition' that would make.

- (1) Henry Williamson, *Genius of Friendship*.
- (2) Desmond Stewart, *T.E. Lawrence*, a new biography.
- (3) A.W. Lawrence, *T.E. Lawrence by his Friends*. Chapter written by HW.
- (4) Philip Knightley and Colin Simpson, *The Secret Lives of Lawrence of Arabia*.

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