# THE 'VICTORY DAY' CHAPTERS OF 'THE DREAM OF FAIR WOMEN'

## Ronald Walker

> Thank God the end of the awful blind waste and brutality of war has come, and let us pray it may never return... I am feeling rather ill and depressed in spite of all the rejoicing around me; immeasurably relieved, glad to be alive, and glad we have won; but tired and a little sad.
>
> Henry Williamson (ed): *A Soldier's Diary of the Great War* (1929)

THE POWER AND BRILLIANCE of the fifteen volumes of *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight* have tended to throw into shadow the youthful *Flax of Dream* with its gentler strength, its romanticism, its charm and melancholy. (1) David Hoyle has bluntly called it "a failure as a work of fiction".(2) But without knowing the criteria he is using to distinguish failures from successes in fiction, it is difficult to offer a useful counter-argument. The flaws in any Williamson novel may, paradoxically, contribute to its ultimate success, as they do with greater writers such as Conrad or Hardy. They may be regarded as the defects of his quality. Novelists can be like members of our family, loved not in spite of their faults but because of them.

Of the four novels in *The Flax of Dream*, the third, *The Dream of Fair Women*, is probably the least attractive. The writing is certainly uneven. There are passages of maudlin sentiment, areas of tedium, and moments of sheer melodrama. Willie Maddison is sometimes disagreeable and unsympathetic as the central character. Evelyn Fairfax is ambivalently presented: at on moment we are inclined to think there can be no such creature, and at the next she lives brilliantly as an irritant, as real and as infuriating as Lucetta Templeman or Sue Bridehead. Elsewhere in the novel, however, there are passages that evoke post-war melancholia and bitterness with tremendous power, and the five chapters that concern the 'Victory Day' celebrations (chapters 17-21) are in this respect outstanding.

They provide the sharpest focus for Willie Maddison's mental unrest and emotional chaos. Part I has ended with his departure to Folkestone. He has left 'Rat's Castle' and the "happy sands" of Cryde Bay, sleeping on a haystack, watching from the windows of a train "swishtailing cattle" in the stagnant summer heat. Now in Folkestone he renews contact with the insufferable Evelyn Fairfax. Williamson - if not very convincingly - contrives to bring also to Folkestone everyone of significance in the story so far: Mary Ogilvie, Elsie Norman, Julian Warbeck, Charlie Cerr-Norr and, as it transpires, Phillip Maddison as well. This crowded cast-list enables him to vibrate a great many strings of personal relationship. In bringing Willie Maddison out of gloomy isolation he throws him

into a harrowing world of past associations, not only with his tormented youth but with the dark miseries of the war-years too.

The 'Victory Day' chapters are firmly set in historical time: the ninth of July 1919. The Great War was ending as it had begun; it was August 1914 all over again. What had started as a crusade was now seen by Asquith as a healing power: "It is not too much to say that it has cleansed and purged the whole atmosphere of the world". The Germans were still unforgivable: "Brutes they were when they began the war," commented Balfour, "and Brutes they remain." Only *The Daily Herald* raised doubts about the severity of the peace terms. The British government kept up a steady supply of patriotic parades: the Guards division had their day, then the Australians, then the Canadians. The National Anthem was sung in Parliament. Indeed, peace-fever was scarcely distinguishable from war-fever, and the demand for war-memorials was frenetic. The 'Victory Day' celebrations which Williamson describes as taking place at Folkestone were one with hundreds of others all over the country, with their bonfires, crackers, trumpets, decorations and unlimited supplies of alcohol. The Folkestone setting, though of course an autobiographical element, is also useful to suggest the great holiday scramble to the coast, citizens rushing away on their first summer vacation for five years. This swarming summer activity is a vital part of the atmosphere of Williamson's narrative.

Within this 'external' atmosphere there exists the 'internal' one, generated by the dialogue and also by several passages of narrated interior monologue. It is an atmosphere of post-war *ennui* and disillusion familiar to us in many writers of the period (C.E. Montague, Richard Aldington, R.H. Mottram among them). Maddison is heard remarking to Mary Ogilvie that he is "homesick for the guns", and this is followed by a paragraph that seems to belong to the *Chronicle* rather than to the 1931 *Flax of Dream*:

> *In his mind was lighted by memory a sombre picture of flame and smoke and shards upbursting from broken earth like the blown coal-dust fire round an iron wheel-hoop in a blacksmith's forge; and moving slowly in corpse-rotten mud were men with faces toadstool-pale under their helmets, men with dislustred eyes, hollow-minded and beyond fear. They were men who had bidden farewell to wife, mother, child - who had loved the green fields, the evening talk in some tavern. They were entirely human, of no class or creed, of no race or nation; and they were dead* (pp.761-2)

Against this lurid backdrop of memory, Williamson arranges the immediate 'properties' of the Grand Hotel which surround Maddison, the "hectic throng", the "mass shuffling". the "bombilation of negroid music". The details provided are an ironic indication of the vapidity and the falsity of an occasion that commemorates 'victory' with no regard for the cost it has entailed:

> *Pale cheeks and sunbrowned cheeks, painted cheeks and pencilled eyebrows, lampblacked lashes and blue-rubbed eyelids. Eyes that were sweet and young and gentle, eyes that were old and hard and*

> *false-bright with liquor. Pupils shining with love and happiness; liquified by belladonna and diminished by morphine-sulphate... Young and old, they sought personal happiness, he thought, one among pom-poms aswing and scarves floating above the sussurration of skirts and the sibilation of shoes. They clasped aloofly, firmly, tenderly, amiably, delightedly, abandonedly, round waists and shoulders and necks. The brilliant lights shone on the Peace Night revellers.* (p.762)

The description, with its forceful use of accumulation, contrast, and even poetic devices such as alliteration and onomatopoeia, is impressive and effective, the kind of writing Williamson could do supremely well - but not, alas, often enough.

Maddison is caught up in the mindless revelry, and his thoughts grow towards that vision of human brotherhood that we know so well as Williamson's personal response to the Great War, held until the day of his death in the face of its logical consequences in a world not yet ready for it:

> *Pushed hither and thither, Eve clasped to his chest, Maddison experienced a surge of happiness so strong he felt that if only his voice could equal it his shouts would roll round the earth: that the spirit of the moment's fraternity must never be lost, never be allowed to subside, but must gather impetus and be grasped, so that human enmity and strife should perish for ever! ... And with shining eyes he looked around him, his head above most men.* (p.770)

That last phrase is not without its symbolism. Willie, Phillip, and Henry unite, physically in their gangling length of body, and spiritually in the role of seer and prophet, overpeering the insensitive masses, heirs of a private kingdom of peace and brotherhood.

The chapters are also admirable for their handling of character-confrontation. They display a sharpness, a penetration, and an understanding of pathos (in several episodes) that rival the best of Williamson in the maturer novels. Among the encounters is a forceful one between Maddison and Mrs White, whose first son, Herbie, was killed in the war, and whose second son, Peter, is to commit suicide through his unrequited love for Evelyn Fairfax. Mrs White, in her vulgarity, is an object of scorn to some of the revellers. Her expression, "Ta much, dearie", they find uproariously funny. Yet Maddison's conversation with her is warm and sensitive, the response of a man who can understand the grief of maternal bereavement. That 'Sandy' White is also is also in the toils of Evelyn Fairfax causes Maddison to feel "the heaviness coming again in his breast". His attitude to Mrs White forms a vital contrast to his attitude to Evelyn, yet his knowledge of what 'Sandy' White is going through affects that attitude disturbingly:

> *"Eve, Eve, why do all these men love you? Do you love them first?"*
>
> *"Still asking questions? Well, I'll answer. I don't know why*

*they love me; I wish they wouldn't. The second question I won't deign to answer."*

*"For God's sake tell me. Do you love them?"*

*"No, you damned fool. Do you think I give myself to anyone? That I'm just a tart?"*

*He could not answer.*

*"Do you?"*

*"I don't know," he said miserably, pressing his brow in the soft hollow between neck and shoulder.* (pp.775-6)

In 'Sandy's' desperate infatuation, Maddison finds the echo of his own. "My heart is filled with dead men," says Evelyn, in an unexpected burst of luminosity. She too is part of war's waste and brutality; she has lived on while ten million have died.

The encounter between Willie and Phillip is a strange element in this section. The autobiographical features in these two cousins will always be a source of fascination and speculation to Williamson readers. Here we find them, in a sense, unified:

*Just before midnight Maddison saw strolling into the ballroom a soldier he had not noticed before. The newcomer was tall and with a small dark moustache, in a blue patrol jacket with high collar, and his trousers with red piping down the seams were fastened under his Wellington boots... The slim and elegant figure had an air of aloofness, and as he came nearer, occasionally glancing at the faces of men and women seated round the walls, he recognised his cousin Phillip. He got up and went towards him, noticing with pride that the first ribbons of the row were the Distinguished Service Order and the Mons Star with silver rosette ... He wore his black hair short and his deep blue eyes had the same speculative look that had been so pronounced in him as a boy.*

Their conversation follows a genial, unstudied course - almost a predictable one: the battle of the Somme, the new Falcon motor-bike, "old man whiskey". Then Evelyn appears and, with her, come constraint and tension. Phillip's voice is now "low and unsteady", he stammers, he stares, and under her "inscrutable eyes" takes his leave. "Good-bye, Mignon," he says. "It is over now. Yes, it is over." He speaks "without reproach, without disesteem, only sadness". He walks out of the hotel "for ever" - to live again, we might add, in 'Ancient Sunlight'. This encounter is riddling, absorbing, evocative. We are baffled again, as so often, by Williamson's love of mystification.

And over and over again the sustained brilliance of the narration is a source of surprise, whether in its choice of epithet, in emotive force, or in the sheer rhythmic flow of the paragraph. Here is Maddison making his way across the downs to the hotel where the celebrations reach their apotheosis:

*Some minutes afterwards the red-whiteness cleared from his sight, and he walked in darkness round the fosse. Unceasing in the long dry grasses the wind made its myriad lispings, rising and falling*

> *like the sighs of the lost generation come from the battlefields of Europe. The starlight made it possible to walk swiftly on the chalky downs. Larks roosting in the tufts sprang up with frightened chirrups at his passing, and fluttered away in the dark to seek other crouching places. He remained with the field-crickets and the stars while the rockets streaked upwards from the Leas, breaking at the pause of their curves into red and green showers. Verey lights, no longer needed by the detrenched army, soared with them, descending in wavy pools of radiance.*
>
> *Then at different points great serpent tongues of flame darted at the sky: the beacons were kindled.* (p.748)

Light dominates the writing here: he notes "the curl and twist of the wild flames breaking skywards", tokens of "England's ended darkness". "Sheep and cattle shuffled in the darkness beyond the fire." In the town, "arc-lamps above the heads of the people were spluttering and shooting out their stark and coppery rays". But it is not alone colour and movement that the author so sensitively handles. There is sound as well. Maddison listens to "the faint roar that rose with the glow of Folestone's rejoicing, and was passing, ghostlike, across the lightless huts". And, now and then, the odd, almost casual detail breaks into the narrative, giving it concreteness and particularity, as, for example, when Maddison goes home after the revelry and falls asleep on the Leas near to a heap of glowing embers, to awake "in th steely pallor of dawn". He is cold. He creeps nearer to the fire. And he is followed by "a mongrel dog that had been curled against his back". Here Williamson is in the company of all the great masters of detail, from Pepys and Defoe to Hardy and Kilvert: that "mongrel dog" creates the picture rather than embellishes it.

There is no loss of power in the opening of Chapter 21, though the danger of an anti-climax must have been present after four chapters of such intensity and range.

> *Thrushes were singing when he awoke again, with the mongrel licking his face. The fire was a rough flat circle of white ash around which a few dishevelled figures were lying. Dozens of bottles black, green, and transparent, whole and broken, labelled and plain, were scattered with paper, orange peel, stoppers, Mr Archibald Dodder's brown bowler, boots and shoes, a set of false teeth, a woman's torn skirt, walking sticks, flattened hats, fragments of food, and a dead swallow winged by the heat. At one end of the fire stood a discoloured iron seat, evidently uprooted from the promenade and cast on the bonfire during the frolics. Across the embers the Grand Hotel quivered and faded in the hot air arising, seeming insubstantial and remote as the happenings of the night before.* (p.780)

We are firmly brought back to historical reality as Maddison goes into the town and buys a newspaper with "uninteresting headlines about the Versailles Treaty', then to a restaurant where "a tousled girl with undarned stockings and dragging slippers brought him some kind of fried fish called aussie, margarine, and a pot of strong tea which he drank

from a thick mug". And, as he makes his way to 9a The Paragon, through the Georgian squares, he sees the cats sitting in the roadway, servants sweeping, or shaking mats and rugs. Normality has returned after a night of hectic, feverish emotion and unrest. It is the atmosphere of this "normality" which strikes us here. As so often with matutinal normality, there is a dull, impersonal quality about it; movement is undeliberate, its purposes half-defined; an air of stagnation and distaste pervades the scene. Maddison notices, for example, "some miserable flies" stuck to wet paint. The mongrel dog is sick, and promptly deserts him. He is awaking to the real post-war world, a world exhausted, drained, irreperably wounded, a world blemished for ever. Then follows another master-touch of actuality:

> *He saw a big cat crouching under a shrub, its yellow eyes fixed on a wren stittering above it. He recognised the monster as belonging to Major Fairfax's grandfather, and threw a piece of earth at it.*
>
> *"I'm glad you've 'it 'im," spoke someone behind. "Great fat ugly birdketching fleabitten eunuch." He looked over the bushes and the railings, and saw a female servant standing there, leaning on a broom.* (p.781)

The camera eye, the microphonic ear, and the power to reproduce dialogue, quintessential gifts of authorship, are seldom more authentically displayed than in such an episode.

The 'Victory Day' chapters, then, hold us as a distinguished prose-record of sharply-observed post-war disorientation and spiritual torpor. Williamson has seen the Great War as traumatic, and as destructive of a great deal more than just physical life. The *Chronicle* has been praised as an "act of total recall", and what is striking here is that, in the earlier work, we have such an act in miniature; and, being in miniature, it lacks the sometimes hampering weight of indiscriminate detail which from time to time mars the far more ambitious *Chronicle*. Neither do considerations of style go by the board, as they do fairly frequently in that masterpiece.

These episodes are compulsively readable. The mingling of shadowy autobiography and fiction, always absorbing, has here a particular virtue, in that Williamson has not apparently abused his freedom to select and arrange. The tautness and concentration of the chapter-sequence clearly indicate this control.

Williamson has given us a highly-sensitised picture of the true nature of what Wilfred Owen called "the cess of war"; four years of poisonous combat has led only to sickness of mind and spirit, to disillusionment, to the total concealment of truth by elderly reactionaries. The same mentality which mismanaged the war is now seeking to enact the policies of retrenchment. A relevant epilogue to this study is found in the historian E.L. Woodward's *Short Journey*:

> *Darkness is not better than light, death is not better than life; no praise from comfortable men can bring the dead back to the sun they loved.*

(The last thing that Henry Williamson was - "a comfortable man"!) Maddison's 'Victory Day' is spent in spiritual darkness, and in the agonised company of the dead who would never again know the sun that blazed down that day on the Folkestone Leas.

REFERENCES

(1) This article refers to the one-volume edition of *The Flax of Dream* published by Faber in 1936. Book Three, *The Dream of Fair Women*, was first published in 1924 and revised in 1931.
(2) David Hoyle, 'Some Notes on "The Flax of Dream" and "A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight"', in B.Sewell (ed.), *Henry Williamson: the Man, the Writings. A Symposium*. (Tabb House, 1980)

"... he walked into No Man's Land and found himself face to face with living Germans."