

From a Book of Clippings....

'TARKA THE OTTER': THE HAWTHORNDEN PRIZE. MR WILLIAMSON AND HIS WORK.

On Tuesday Last the ninth award of the Hawthornden Prize was announced by Mr John Galsworthy at the Aeolian Hall. The Prize, founded in 1919 by Miss Alice Warrender, is awarded annually to a work of imaginative literature by an author under forty-one years of age - forty-one (the "military age" of 1914) being considered to be an officially-determined frontier between youth and age. The Committee from the beginning has consisted of the donor, Mr Laurence Binyon, Mr Robert Lynd, Mr Edward Marsh, and Mr J.C. Squire; previous winners of the prize have been Edward Shanks, Romer Wilson, John Freeman, Edmund Blunden, David Garnett, Sean O'Casey, R.H. Mottram and V. Sackville-West.

This year's award was especially interesting, because the author (previous to the award) was probably less well known to the general public than any of his predecessors. He has had applause enough from his colleagues in literature. Mr Galsworthy's eulogy at the Aeolian Hall was a whole-hearted as it was eloquent; Sir John Fortescue wrote an introduction to Mr Williamson's last book; and others who are known to cherish an admiration for him include Mr Edward Garnett, Mr H.M. Tomlinson and Colonel T.E. Lawrence - whose oriental seclusion does not prevent him from taking an eager interest in current literature. With a consensus of this character behind him Mr Williamson was bound at some time to win through; but it must be admitted that up to the present the general public has shown as little inclination to admire, or even to look at, the books of Mr Henry Williamson, as, at an earlier date, it showed with regard to those of Mr W.H. Hudson. *Tarka* has had some success; its predecessors, *Lone Swallows* and *The Old Stag*, had virtually none.

Hudson is the right name to mention. No two men of genius are precisely the same as each other; for that matter no two leaves on a tree are exactly alike. But there are oak-leaves and beech-leaves; and Mr Williamson is in the family and succession of Hudson and Jefferies. He is a nature writer who is more poet than zoologist, although a very close and exact observer. He has shaken the dust of towns off his feet, lives in a remote countryside, and has contrived an equal familiarity with beasts and those who chase them, rural landscapes and those who live in them. Differences might easily be established between Mr Williamson and his predecessors; he has more sense of humour than Hudson, he is less neurotic than Jefferies, he is probably more at home in a village public-house than either of them would have been. Yet, since man must be roughly described for the benefit of those whom one is persuading to know him, he must certainly be admitted to be sealed of the tribe of those men. Nobody who likes their work could dislike his.

Tarka the Otter is the life-story of an otter. It has obvious defects that anyone could point out. Mr Williamson is young and has settled in Devonshire: his gambols in dialect must bewilder the natives: he welcomes recondite words from any source. His book has also the dis-

advantage (but what a rare and welcome disadvantage!) of being too tightly packed. All the water has been squeezed out of it, there is something in every sentence, and the reader is allowed no relief. Somebody remarked at the Hawthornden gathering that there was too much eating in it. That cannot be helped; what else could an otter do? Beyond these criticisms few could be made.

As Mr Galsworthy said, the book is full of fine, vivid phrases of description, and the author gets inside the skin of an animal as few authors have done.

(From a Special Correspondent)
The Sunday Observer, 17 June 1928

Fred Shepherd has provided us with this amusing skit on Tarka the Otter style and vocabulary which appeared in Beachcomber's column in The Daily Express on 15 November 1934. Commenting on the escape of a peregrine falcon, Beachcomber writes:

I will wager that if Mr Henry Williamson - 'Devon's Dandelion' as we call him in the Junior Winged Things Club - were to hold out his wrist and give the peculiar whistle of the anxious falconeer, that bird would come back to roost before you could say mdglhlmjczcpszeltrm-vrmbppp which is what falconers say when, after a heavy fall of dew on the saltins and dirt-flats, a black-faced gerfalcon from Tarumti gets its beak caught in the door.

I shall never forget that early April morning long ago when Mr Williamson and I went quietly down the swiftly-flowing Doodle in a duck-punt. The stars were still out, and on our left the badgers were croaking in the selvedge-bosses. An old heron went caumbling down to Widdenham Furlong. We could see the spindthrift of dawn on his rosseted biceps.

Suddenly a peregrine, four foot by one, and seven by three, skoomed out of a gazzle-bush. We stood up in the punt and cast our nets at it. They caught in a wild hornbeam which grew by the bank, and the bird whooped on its way to Drivelham Bridge.

That night we had fermitt-pudden in the Cat and Daffodil.